Meet the Suzumiyas

By: JonBob0008

In order to avoid having to move away, Kyon is given the option of moving in with Haruhi. Knowing that this would mean meeting her parents, Kyon soon finds out that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. KyonXHaruhi *Story Complete!*

Status: complete

Published: 2009-04-15

Updated: 2011-01-24

Words: 244384

Chapters: 33

Rated: Fiction T - Language: English - Genre: Humor/Romance - Characters: Kyon, Haruhi S. - Reviews: 1,559 - Favs: 1,170 - Follows: 573

Original source: https://www.fanfiction.net/s/4994973/1

Exported with the assistance of FicHub.net

Meet the Suzumiyas

Introduction
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26

Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Epilogue
Omake Part 1
Omake Part 2

Chapter 1

"Without further ado, Haruhi Suzumiya will go on with the disclaimer."

Haruhi picks up a piece of paper and begins reading. "This story is a work of fan fiction. The author of this story claims no ownership of the characters, locations or events that this story uses. Anyone that claims that… why do I have to read this? Isn't it obvious?"

Kyon shrugs his shoulders. "Beats me. Just do it so we can move on."

Haruhi drops the paper and walks off. "Forget it. I'm bored. Let's go!"

Kyon facepalms and follows Haruhi off the stage.

Meet the Suzumiyas

It was yet another typical day in the clubroom. I was currently strategizing my next move in a game of chess against Koizumi. We were about halfway through the match and it was clear that I was beginning to gain the upper-hand when I had taken out his queen in the previous move. Seriously, it was such a bone-headed move that I half-believed he did it on purpose. Why does he like these games so much if he sucks at them?

Asahina-san was busy working on homework from what appeared to be math class. Although she usually gives the appearance of someone of unexceptional intellect, watching her complete the problems she was doing seemed to indicate that she was a lot smarter than she let on. I only wish I could do as well at math as she does.

Nagato-san was sitting in her usual corner, reading what appeared to be an old, Spanish version of Don Quixote. I began to contemplate

as to whether there were any languages that Nagato didn't know. Maybe there were some African or South American tribal languages that she didn't know. There was no doubt that she was familiar with all the popular languages.

Finally, my eyes moved towards the front of the room, where our very own brigade commander appeared to be watching something intently on the computer. I assumed it was some kind of video, perhaps a clip from one of those shows that explore haunted houses. However, I was soon corrected when Haruhi let out an exasperated groan.

"Aww man! I can't believe he failed! I thought for sure he'd win the money!"

Puzzled by her comment, I decided to open my mouth. "What are you watching a game show?"

Haruhi raised her eyebrow in my direction, an obvious indicator that I was wrong once again. "Of course not! I was watching a show about this supposed psychic that was trying to win that million dollar prize that was being given out by the James Randi Foundation."

Ah, now it makes sense. The James Randi Foundation is an organization founded by the world famous skeptic and former magician James Randi. He goes around the world trying to find rational explanations for seemingly phenomenal events. I was a bit of a fan of his until a year ago when I met Haruhi.

Anyway, his foundation has this prize that they're holding onto that is worth one million US dollars to anyone that can prove under strict laboratory conditions a paranormal phenomenon. This prize has been up for grabs for years, yet not one person has come to claim the prize. This fact has been a bit of a thorn in Haruhi's side, considering the fact that she adamantly wants to find the paranormal.

"It pisses me off!" stated Haruhi. "If there really are people with paranormal abilities in this world, why hasn't anyone claimed the prize yet?"

Well, I can think of three reasons why that would be. One, it could be that there really are no paranormal phenomenon. Two, those with paranormal abilities that could prove themselves are unaware of the prize or are unable to compete for it for reasons beyond their control. Or three, those with paranormal abilities simply do not care to win the prize.

"Oh come on, Kyon! Do you really think that those are the reasons? I think that maybe they're covering up the truth!"

I highly doubt that they are. I still stand by my reasons. I know better now that the first choice was not the case. I already know that aliens, time travelers and espers are in fact real. The second choice seems somewhat unlikely as well as this is a fairly well known prize and somebody with actually powers would be able to prove themselves eventually. The third choice, given what I know, seemed the most logical. Aliens, such as Nagato, would hardly be concerned with proving themselves to the world especially if they're supposed to keep themselves a secret so they can keep an eye out on Haruhi. The same could be said about the espers, although their powers would be difficult to prove under laboratory conditions anyway. As for time travelers, proving their existence would likely cause a time paradox, and their powers are the product of radically advanced science and thus don't really count as paranormal anyway.

Haruhi the stood up from her chair, a look of defiance pasted on her expression. "I hereby declare that the James Randi Foundation is the sworn enemy of the SOS Brigade! I declare war on them! WAR!"

I highly doubt the JREF is concerned about the actions of a Japanese high school pseudo-club. Isn't James Randi himself in his eighties. I'm sure he's more concerned about staying alive then anything else.

It was then that Koizumi stated "check" while I was being distracted by Haruhi's nonsense. Dammit, you're not supposed to beat me!

Luckily, I was able to rally back and defeat Koizumi later in that match. Soon afterwards, club activities for the day had ended so we all got up and went home. Today had overall been a pretty relaxing day for the Brigade, and I certainly wasn't going to complain. It had been month since anything weird had happened to us (that weird thing being those data lifeforms that currently reside inside my cat). The new school year had started without much fanfare and little seems to have changed other than the fact that we now reside in a different classroom from now on.

Before long, we arrived at our usual meeting place and went our separate ways. The trip back home was less than memorable as I made my way into my front door. I hadn't expected the rest of my day to be anything unusual, but unfortunately I was wrong. The first thing I had noticed was that my younger sister was in tears while being balled up on the floor. Before I could walk up to her and ask her what was the matter, I was approached by my mother…

The next half hour felt completely surreal. I kept trying to convince myself that this wasn't happening and that it was a joke. My mother explained to me that my father was being transferred to an office that would be to the far north and that we had to move in order for it to be possible for my father to make the trip to and from work. We were going to be moving this Sunday, and I would have to transfer to a new school. We would move in with relatives until we could find a place for us to stay. I kept hearing my sister pleas to my mother that she didn't want to move and that she liked going to school here. The truth of the matter was that I felt the exact same way. I was really enjoying my life at North High School. I began to think about my classmates Taniguchi and Kunikida, as well as the senior Tsuruya. I think thought about the SOS brigade starting from Asahina to Nagato and even Koizumi. Finally, I thought of Haruhi… How would she react to me moving away? No doubt that this was a serious problem.

I spent the rest of the day in my room, feeling somewhat sick to my stomach. I knew I had to tell everyone that I was going to be moving, but I couldn't find the will to do it. I guess I'll do it tomorrow.

I can only guess as to what was going to happen when I told Haruhi the news…

Chapter 2

Thanks for the early support! I'm usually the type to type out ridiculously long chapters, but I wanted to discipline myself so try to bring out this story in smaller, more easily digested chunks. Hope you enjoy!

Chapter 2

I didn't sleep at all last night, and it definitely showed on my face when I arrived at school this morning. Guess it was all for the better, cause my sister never got out of bed this morning, either, so if I had fallen asleep I'd probably never get up. She pretty much was my alarm clock after all.

Haruhi was in class before me. She greeted me with her usual mischievous smile, but it quickly disappeared when she notice the condition I was in. "What happened to you? You look like crap…"

I sighed deeply as I approached my seat. I knew I had to tell Haruhi the truth, but I couldn't bring myself to tell her yet. "Nothing, I just couldn't sleep last night."

Haruhi let out an exasperated groan. "You better not be falling asleep in class again today. You're grades are going to suck again this year if you screw around. Don't think I'm going to bail you out again when test time comes. That last time was a freebie, okay? A freebie!" She then starts jabbing me with her mechanical pencil. "The next time you need my help it'll cost you!"

You're going to charge money to me for tutoring? Not that it would be a big deal I guess. She was a really good tutor. Sadly, this thought brought me right back to the realization that there wasn't going to be another time. I was moving soon, and I needed to let the whole Brigade know.

Strangely enough, the lectures in class were enough of a distraction from my current worries that I quickly fell asleep during class, despite Haruhi's warnings. It really wasn't until lunchtime that I was awoken by someone moving my shoulder. I jumped up from the unexpected physical contact only to find that it was Taniguchi.

"Whoa man, you were out cold. Didn't you get any sleep last night?"

After noticing that Haruhi had already left the classroom, I gathered with Taniguchi and Kunikida for lunch. It was then that I began to explain to them that I was moving.

"What?! Are you kidding me?!" asked Taniguchi.

"Wow, I can't believe it?" responded Kunikida.

I continued to explain the situation, telling them all the details that I knew, including the fact that I was moving on Sunday. They were quite in shocked at my sudden departure. Most of the lunch period was quite somber after that. It was only during that last five minutes that Taniguchi finally spoke up.

"Have you told Suzumiya-san, yet?"

"Nope…"

"I'll bet she'll take it pretty hard," said Kunikida.

I agree, which is exactly why I haven't told her yet. I know it's very cowardly of me to not say anything, but in all honestly this really wasn't the best time to tell her anyway. Perhaps I'll just let her know when we get to the clubroom. That way, I could tell the Brigade as a whole and get it out of the way…

I can't do it! I'm walking my way towards the clubroom, and I can feel that I'm getting cold feet at the idea of letting everyone know at once. To make matters worse, Haruhi is on cleaning duty, so I'd have to

wait for her to get done before I'd let everyone know. I know for a fact that waiting for her would drive me up the wall. I could tell the other three first, but then that would leave me telling Haruhi by herself, and I really, really didn't want to do that.

It wasn't long while I was contemplating my options before I reached the door to the clubroom. After knocking and being told I could enter, I opened the door to find Nagato, Asahina-san and Koizumi already in the room. Did I really walk that slowly today?

Asahina-san was in the middle of brewing tea in her maid outfit. She was the first to notice that I wasn't feeling 100% today. "Oh my, Kyon! You look terrible today. I'll have your tea ready real soon."

Oh Asahina-san! You truly are an angel from heaven. I curse my rotten, horrible fortune that this will be the last week that I will ever get to enjoy your wonderful elixirs. I have no idea what I will do with myself not drinking your tea everyday…

As soon as it was done, Asahina-san gave my cup to me right away. I thanked her and took my sip. She must have taken extra care this time. It was easily the best tea she has ever brewed in the clubroom. It almost brought tears to my eyes. If there is a higher being responsible for these turn of events, I must find a way of slaying him… or her for that matter.

Koizumi had grabbed the Chinese checkers board and put it on the table. I shook my head at the gesture. I was definitely not in the mood for board games.

"Well now I know something must be wrong," said Koizumi. "Anything you'd like to tell us?"

I paused for a few seconds, realizing that there was one person I absolutely had to tell more than anyone else. "Actually, there is. Koizumi. Could we talk somewhere else?"

We decided to head up to the roof of the school to talk. After pausing briefly once we got there, I began to explain the entire situation to him. I knew that since he and his organization were directly in charge of insuring that Haruhi's emotional state remained balanced, telling him this news was going to be of severe importance.

After I had finished, I could tell that Koizumi's smile could only barely hide that fact that he was quite upset. Whether it was that fact that he was going to miss me or the fact that his life was going to be miserable for the perceivable future, I wasn't sure. Perhaps it was both.

"I see…" spoke Koizumi, who was obviously trying to think of what to say next. "This'll definitely be very problematic. I take it that you haven't told Suzumiya-san."

I began to stare into the clouds while we were talking. "Nope."

"It is almost certain that this news will put Suzumiya-san into an unstable emotional state. As you already know, her emotional state is strongly linked around you and your actions. I fear that a catastrophic event might occur the moment she hears the news."

I too had already thought of the possibility that such an event could occur. If this had happened maybe eight months ago, it would be certain that the world, no the entire universe, could be in danger. Somehow, I got the feeling that there was at least a small chance that it wouldn't happen that way now. She might get upset, but I don't think she'd want to remake the world over this… at least I hope not.

"You're trust in Suzumiya-san is nothing short of amazing. You really think that she won't remake the world upon hearing this news. I hate to admit it, but I'm not so convinced myself. I'm a bit envious of you."

I don't know why you're so envious of me. You're not the one who's moving.

Koizumi chuckled lightly. "Yeah, I guess so. Moving is always unpleasant for everyone. No doubt you'll be busy packing for the next few days."

Don't remind me. I'm tired enough as it is. I last thing I want to hear is about all the hard work I'm going to have to do all the way into Sunday.

Koizumi began walking towards the door. "We better head back down. I'm sure Suzumiya-san is in the clubroom by now, and I'd hate to have her wonder what we are up to."

We headed downstairs and back into the clubroom. Sure enough, Haruhi was already there sitting at her computer monitor. She raised her head and gave us a look of annoyance.

"Where the hell have you two been? Mikuru told me you two were talking about something. What was it about?!"

I wasn't ready to tell Haruhi just yet. I just couldn't. Damn I'm such a coward. "Don't worry about it. It was only boy stuff."

She gave me a look of suspicion before looking at Koizumi. He merely gave a weak smile and shrugged. Satisfied with his response, she brought her eyes back to the computer monitor. "Whatever…"

The rest of the day in the clubroom was nothing too special. I spent the rest of my time there sleeping. I began to wonder how long it would take before I would finally catch up on my sleep debt.

When I finally got home, I found that my mother had already begun the beginning stages of packing. My sister was no where in site. She must still be hiding in her room crying her eyes out. I entered my room to find Shamisen sleeping at the foot of my bed. Ah, what it must be like to be blissfully ignorant of what's happening around you. At least you don't get to do any work when we move.

Since I didn't feel the motivation to do any packing, I lied down on my bed and stared at the ceiling. I have no idea how I'm going to break the news to the others. I never did get around to telling Nagato or Asahina-san, let alone Haruhi. I kept thinking it over for more than an hour before I finally got sick of thinking about it and grabbed my cell phone.

I made the decision to call Asahina-san first. She picked up the phone after only a couple rings. "Hello?"

"Asahina-san? It's me."

"Kyon-kun? What's wrong?"

She sounded as if she already knew why I'm calling. Then again, I doubted my voice did much to hide the fact that I had something troubling me. I looked like a wreck all day for a reason.

I began to explain what was happening to me, about the fact that I was moving and that I would be gone by this Sunday. She listened carefully to everything I had to say, and when I was finished, her silence seemed a definite sign that she was shocked about it.

"I see…"

"I'm really sorry that this is happening so suddenly… I should have told you in person."

Her voice suddenly brightened up, as if trying to cheer me up. "It's okay Kyon-kun. I'm sure everything will work out. There's nothing to be sorry about."

Oh Asahina-san, you truly must be a saint for you to be able to hear this saddening news and try to cheer me up instead of yourself. You really don't need to be so selfless.

"Have you told Suzumiya-san?"

"… I'm afraid to…"

"You'll be okay. Just be sure to tell her soon, okay?"

I hung up with her shortly afterwards. I can only imagine that she would be crying herself to sleep tonight. Poor, poor Asahina-san… I'm so sorry.

I dialed Nagato's number next. It rang three times before it was answered. There was no response on the other side, but I knew she was on the line. "Nagato? It's me." She didn't answer back, but I had decided to continue to talk anyway. "There's something I need to talk to about."

"I see…"

I began to tell her the exact same thing I told Asahina-san only minutes earlier. When I was finished, I waited for her response with baited breath.

"… I see…"

It was difficult to pick up, but after knowing Nagato for as long as I have, I had learned her mannerism and have mastered picking up on the subtle changes in her expressions and tone when she spoke. She was saddened by the news.

Poor Nagato. Only a few months back, you remade the world in order to give me the chance to live a typical normal life. And despite all that and the fact that I ultimately decided to return the world to its previous state, I'm now going to be moving away. I get the feeling that it was all was a waste in the end, wasn't it?

"I've told everyone except Haruhi. To be honest, I'm having a hard time finding the courage to tell her."

"… You need to inform her of this matter soon…"

I was surprised by her response. She continued to speak.

"The sooner you inform her, the less difficult it will be for her to adjust to this event."

After finally letting it sink in, I realized that she was right. She's always right. It would be a cold day in hell the day that Nagato had her facts wrong. She's also come a long way since her old super-introverted self a year ago. She wouldn't have been so open with advice in the past.

"Okay… Take care, Nagato. See you tomorrow."

"Bye…"

I had finally hung up on Nagato after that. I began staring at the phone as I reflected over the events of the last year. There were some crazy times. Almost being killed by Asakura… twice. Solving the "murder" on the island. Being stuck in a nearly endless time loop during summer vacation. The crazy movie we made. The strange mansion that we got stuck in. Not to mention the world be recreated by Nagato. If I had anything to say about all those events, the truth was that they were the best moments of my entire life. It seemed like my entire life was an adventure. I mean, sure it was nice to have a break in between those events every once in a while, but I wouldn't trade in those memories for all the yen in all of Japan…

… and now it was coming to an end…

I opened the phone and began to dial Haruhi's number. By now, I had her number completely memorized. Despite this, it took me an eternity to press each button. I stared down at the send button after pressing the last number. Just one more button push and I'll be on my way to getting the worst part of this moving over. I just need to tell Haruhi and be done with it…

… I couldn't do it.

I closed the phone and tossed it on the floor before laying back to get some sleep. I'll tell her in person tomorrow. I know it's not what I

wanted to do in the first place, but it's better that way.

I was up for most of the night again…

It took every last bit of will power in my body to get up when the alarm went off. I haven't been this tired in a long time. I know for a fact that I'd be spending more of today sleeping in class again. Walking up the hill was a nightmare today, especially since it was really warm.

I arrived before Haruhi this time and immediately sat down at my desk and laid my head down to sleep. It didn't take long before I started to doze off. I never even noticed Haruhi walking into the class. It was only when I felt a pen jab into my shoulder was her existence was made known to me. I jumped up and turned to her angrily.

"OW! What the hell?!"

She stared daggers back at me. "Don't tell me you didn't get any sleep again! What the hell is wrong with you?!"

I turned away from her and laid my head back down. "Nothing…"

She went and kicked my chair. "Liar! Something's up! What's with you lately?!"

Even though I knew I had to tell her the truth eventually, I didn't want it to be in the middle of class. I was mentally kicking myself for my procrastination, but it wasn't enough to change my mind.

"I don't want to talk about it…"

I heard her snort in irritation. She left me alone for a few minutes though before she finally shook my shoulder. Dammit, leave me alone! I looked up at her and saw her hand held out.

"Let me take you to the nurse's office. Since you're going to sleep anyway, you may as well do it on a bed."

I reluctantly took up her offer and took her hand. We began to walk to the nurse's office. Haruhi told the nurse that I wasn't feeling well and I needed to rest. I lied down on one of the beds there and began to rest. Haruhi sat by my bedside for a few minutes, watching me. It really made me nervous having her stare at me like that. Go away, dammit!

"You know, as Brigade leader, it is my responsibility to ensure the well being of all of my Brigade members. I'd like to believe that my members can talk to me about anything. So when I see that something is bothering one of my members, it's frustrating when that member refuses to talk to me about it."

She moved her face closer towards mine. Close enough that it was making me a bit uncomfortable. Her face, no matter what expression it wore, was truly a thing of astounding beauty. This made the fact that she was moving so close all the more uncomfortable. She spoke once more.

"Are you absolutely certain you don't want to talk to me about it?"

I rolled over and said nothing. I heard her give a long sigh. I could hear her get up from her chair.

"I'm going back to class."

She paused for a minute before she finally walked away.

I spent the next couple hours sleeping. When I woke up, it was almost lunch time. I finally got up and went back to class. The lunch bell rang just before I got there. I saw Haruhi exit the classroom and begin heading towards me. She paused briefly while looking at me before walking past me. She looked upset. Was she mad at me for not talking to her? I really need to come clean with her soon. I took a deep sigh and walk into the classroom to eat lunch.

Taniguchi wasted no time in prying into my business. "Dude, Suzumiya-san looked pissed all morning. What did you do? Did you tell her you were moving?"

I shook my head.

"What are you waiting on? Just tell her already!"

That's easy for you to say, but this is a lot more complicated than it seems. I know she's going to be upset. I really don't want to be the bearer of bad news…

Taniguchi punched my arm. "Dammit dude! Stop being selfish. You're not doing it for her sake!"

Since when did you care about how I treated Haruhi? And I know that I'm being a bit selfish. Leave me alone about it.

Kunikida finally spoke up. "We don't need to argue and fight. We should make Kyon's last week here as enjoyable as possible. Let's just eat and relax."

I appreciate it. I'll figure out what to do later.

I still haven't figured out what to do…

I'm in the clubroom now with my head resting on my arms. I could definitely feel the energy in the room had dropped about ten fold from what it was yesterday. Koizumi had the chess board out and was playing by himself, but you could see an obvious amount of melancholy on his face. Nagato was still in her corner reading, but I could sense that she was reading at a pace far slower than what was normal for her. She even turned the pages slower than normal. Haruhi wasn't sad, but she was anything but her usual, perky, energy filled self. I noticed that she would occasionally glance at me for a few seconds, as if doing so might give her some insight as to what my condition was.

Strangely enough, there was only one exception to all this. Asahina-san seemed like her perfectly normal self. I'd expected her to be in the same condition I was in, but she barely seemed upset at all. Was she oblivious to what was happening? Did she not understand what I told her last night? Or maybe she doesn't really care… What the hell? She better care, dammit!

Never mind that, I still need to tell Haruhi the truth. The fact of the matter is that I've been mulling it over for the last hour. Should I do what I did with Koizumi and take her up to the roof and tell her? No thanks. Maybe I tell her on the way home… No way. Should I just call her tonight? I know that not going to happen. No matter what idea I came up with in my mind, my mind immediately responded by rejecting it. Could I have Koizumi tell her? No, definitely not. Leave a note? Cowardly… How about I just not say anything and keep her in the dark? That would be low. I began to mentally pull on the hair on my head. This sucked so freaking bad.

Eventually, the day ended and everyone began to walk towards our usual meeting place where we would eventually split off on our separate ways. Koizumi kept pace with me and began talking to me.

"I take it Suzumiya-san still doesn't know."

"Yeah…" was all I could respond with. I wasn't really sure what else to say.

"She's become deeply concerned about your condition. She may appear angry, but she's actually quite worried. You really should just get it over with."

I know, I know… Shut up already!

"Of course, perhaps my organization could do something to prevent…"

"No!" I yelled. "It's bad enough I'm involved with your organization. I'd like to keep my family out of it as much as possible."

"Very well…"

Our conversation drifted off after that. It wasn't long before we finally arrived at the meeting place. We all went our separate ways and went home. I cursed myself for once again procrastinating on telling Haruhi. It was now Wednesday, that meant that I only had three days to finally tell her. I really needed to man up already and just tell her, consequences be damned.

It was when I started getting close to where I left my bike when I noticed the sound of footsteps behind me. I got the feeling that it might have been Koizumi wanting to discuss something, so I turned around to see what he wanted.

I was wrong… It was Haruhi.

She paused briefly when she saw me turn around before she marched up to me. She came close enough that she was practically in my face.

"I demand that you tell me what is going on! No more excuses!"

I turned my head away in nervousness. However, she pulled onto my tie and brought my face within a mere centimeter from her face. I could feel her breath on my face. My heart was pounding like crazy, and no it was because I was scared, okay?

"You're not getting away from this, Kyon. I'll follow you all the way to your home if I have to. And don't think about running either! You know you can't out run me!"

As true as that is, even if I wanted to run, it was impossible since you're holding onto my tie.

She narrowed her eyes and pressed her forehead against mine. She held onto my tie like a vice grip. Just how strong is she anyway?

"Tell me…"

I finally relented. "Okay, okay! I will. Just let go…"

She finally let go. I stammered back a couple steps and tried to regain my composure. I began to stumble along with my words. "Well… uh… you see…"

"Well?! Go ahead and spit it out!"

I finally took a deep breath, collected my thoughts and began speaking.

"Well, the truth is that I've been upset the last few days because…"

I took another deep breath before finishing.

"… I'm moving…"

This chapter was considerably longer than the last one. Sorry about that.

I had to make sure I got through this part of the story.

Anyway, hope you enjoyed it.

Thank you!

Chapter 3

Thank you for your early support, especially Blazing Chaos for his incredibly lengthy yet helpful review. I do know the correct usage of your and you're, but sometimes my fingers and brain are not on the same page. ^^'

This should be another lengthy chapter. I've gotten the message that you guys are okay with that. Hope you enjoy.

Chapter 3

"… I'm moving…"

I could feel my body tense up in anticipation upon releasing those words. I still wasn't sure what to expect, but I figured I should be ready for the worst. The worst of course meant that the world would suddenly end. The good news at least is that it can't get any worse than that, right?

However, when I looked at Haruhi after telling her the truth, I was met with what at first appeared to be a completely blank expression. I could almost literally see the gears in her head turning, calculating the information that had just been received. I could tell that the information was nearly processed when her eyes slowly began to widen, and she soon carried the expression of the deer caught in headlights. I really wished I had a camera on me at the time, because I don't think I'll ever get the chance to see this expression on her face ever again.

She then finally spoke. "Moving?"

"Yeah…"

"… As in… far away?"

"I'm moving up north on Sunday. I'll have to transfer to a different school…"

When I said that, I could he Haruhi's breathing become deeper and faster. I could see her swallowing what was probably excess saliva.

"… I see…"

After a few more seconds passed, she turned around and began to walk away. I could see her gait was very stiff and robotic, as if all of her emotional energy had been completely drained. I knew that when she snapped out of it that she was going to be very upset. A closed space was almost certainly going to be created, which meant a certain esper I knew was going to have a rough night. Sorry Koizumi…

I didn't move until Haruhi had walked out of my sight. I guess you could say that the rest of the night was rather uneventful. I still couldn't motivate myself to pack. I'm such a procrastinator.

I actually slept surprisingly well that night. Maybe it was that fact that I finally got everything off my chest, or the fact that my sleep debt had finally caught up with me. Either way, I found I still had to get myself up this morning again. Poor Imoto-chan… I hope you feel better soon. It's too weird seeing you depressed.

On the way to school, it suddenly hit me that I would only have to walk up this stupid hill one more time after today. Call me crazy, but I think I might actually miss this morning ritual. Then I was lightly punched in the arm from behind.

"Yo Kyon! What's up?"

Taniguchi greeted me in his usual way. He's looking awfully chipper for someone who knows his friend is moving away.

"So does everyone know you're moving yet?"

I nodded, not being in the mood to converse all that much.

"I bet Suzumiya-san was upset."

"Don't know…"

I was kinda lying. I knew she would be, even if she never showed it. Personally, I'm just glad that world is still in one piece.

"Wonder if she'll go back to the way she was before she came here," said Taniguchi

I didn't want to believe that Haruhi would regress that much. It would be such a waste. She's miles away from the kind of person she was back then. I wondered what would happen to the SOS Brigade if she ever did revert back.

The two of us didn't say much more as we walked the rest of the way to school. When I entered the classroom, I found Haruhi had beaten me there. This time it was her turn to have her head resting on her desk. The thought of jabbing her in the shoulder with a pen had crossed my mind, but I knew that this really wasn't the time for that. I finally sat down and turned towards her.

"Didn't sleep well last night?"

"Not really…"

It was obvious from her tone that she didn't have it in her to talk a whole lot, so I turned back to the front of the class.

The rest of the school day went by without much to say about it really. I was reluctant to listen to any of the lectures since I knew I wouldn't be here much longer anyway. Eventually, everyone was once again meeting in the clubroom. The energy was even dimmer than yesterday, since now Haruhi had joined in on the somberness. I also noticed that Koizumi looked incredibly fatigued himself.

"Bad night last night?"

"You could say that…"

I leaned in a little bit and began to whisper to him.

"So… did any of those you-know-whats appear?"

"Unfortunately… they did…"

I knew it. It wasn't at all surprising, after all.

"Last night a closed space indeed appeared. And quite a large one as well. Much larger than most. It took quite some effort to close it down. And from what I can sense from Suzumiya-san's mood, the only logical conclusion is that you finally told her the truth."

Pretty good reasoning I'd say, although I'm sure a lay-person could have figured that out.

"I'm certainly glad that the world is still in one piece. I was very worried that this world would be remade. So far it appears to be okay, but we're far from being in the clear. The next couple weeks will reveal the fate of our world. It may not be until after you leave that the world could be in serious jeopardy."

I had thought of this as well, however much I didn't want to. There wasn't going to be a whole lot I could do to prevent a world reboot if I was far away. Koizumi had his fake smile once again.

"Let's just do our best to enjoy our last few days together."

I noted that he said that last sentence fairly loudly, obviously intending on everyone else to hear it. Both Asahina-san and Nagato raised their heads towards us. Asahina-san smiled and nodded her head. Haruhi didn't respond. She simply continued to stare out the window.

It was at this point that it registered that Asahina-san was still not upset. I was quite a bit irked by this. Damn you Asahina-san! Do you know something I don't? Asahina-san seemed to have noticed me staring at her. She approached me with that smile still on her face.

"Are you okay, Kyon?"

"I can't help but get the feeling that you're a bit unconcerned by the fact that I'm leaving."

She was obviously taken aback by my statement. She began to get flustered as she stammered out a response.

"Well… you see… uh… I… I'm just… trying not to think about it…"

"Oh, really?"

She swallowed hard before continuing.

"I figured that everyone might be sad that you were leaving, so I wanted to do my part to try and lighten the mood as much as possible."

I let out a deep sigh after hearing this. Asahina-san, you really are the source of positive energy for the Brigade. I hope you never lose that quality. The older version of you still seems positive enough.

It was then that Haruhi's chair quickly spun around. She stood up and slammed her hand down on the computer desk with considerable force.

"Kyon! Have you finished packing yet?"

"Nope, haven't even started."

Haruhi sighed and facepalmed.

"Of course you haven't. Leave it to you to leave something so important to the very last day. I don't know what you'd do without me

around to keep you motivated."

She then stood on her chair and held out her hand in a pose of absolute authority.

"It's official then! This Saturday, the SOS Brigade will meet up at Kyon's house to help him pack and get ready to move! After that, we will gather together for a farewell party in honor of the Brigade's first member!"

Everyone stared blankly at Haruhi for about a second before nodding their heads in approval. Koizumi was the first to speak.

"I think that's a wonderful idea, Suzumiya-san!"

Of course you'd think it was a great idea. Haruhi could order the mass murder of everyone in town and you'd be like "how soon do you want it done?" Then again, I did like the idea of the party.

"That's really thoughtful, Suzumiya-san!" said Asahina-san.

Haruhi nodded, smiling for what was probably the first time since yesterday.

"I'll be sure to invite Tsuruya-chan and those other two. Maybe we can have it held at Tsuruya-chan's house."

I love how Taniguchi and Kunikida still haven't quite made it to the level where Haruhi would bother saying their names. Whatever, I doubt they'd say no to coming along. It was shortly after that when Haruhi dismissed the Brigade so she could plan the upcoming party. She wouldn't have a whole lot of time to do it, but it was nice that she found something to keep her positive for the time being. I knew she was probably still sad inside.

The rest of the day went by without much incident. My mother made me start some of the packing this time around, although I didn't really

do more than two boxes before heading to my room and laying back. After watching some TV, I eventually dozed off to sleep.

The next day, I got up for what would be my last day of school at North High. A part of me wanted to stay home, but I knew that both Haruhi and my mother wouldn't have any of it. Oh well… at least this hill won't bother me anymore.

I entered the classroom to find Haruhi staring out the window. I quietly sat in my seat and turned towards her.

"Did you sleep better last night?"

"A little…"

She was still depressed I see. I wonder if any more close spaces appeared.

We didn't talk much more for the rest of the day. To be honest, my last day of school at North High was as uneventful as ever. In fact, it wasn't until I got to the clubroom that anything noteworthy happened. It was there that I met up with Tsuruya-san.

"Hey, Kyon! There you are!"

She ran up to me with all the energy of a rabbit on amphetamines. Her face turned into a scowl when she got to me.

"Damn you! Why didn't you tell me that you were moving?!"

"S… Sorry…"

She began to shake my shoulders back and forth.

"I can't believe you left me in the dark about this. I'm not so sure I'm going to let you have your party at my place now!"

Dammit, I said I'm sorry. What else you do want from me?

Tsuruya-san's scowl slowly disappeared with a sigh. He the put up a weak smile.

"Oh relax, you know I'm kidding, nyoro~. It still sucks though. I only have a day to find a gift for you."

"You really don't have to."

"Nonsense! I'm sure everybody will bring something, too."

Her smile disappeared momentarily, reveal a little sadness.

"It's going to suck not having you around…"

She then patted me on the shoulder and smiled, revealing the cute little fang of hers.

"Oh well, I got to get going. Still need to get things ready for tomorrow. See ya then!"

She then ran off. I have to admit, she's a great friend. I had a hard time believing that I'd find anyone like the people I know here when I move.

It turns out that Haruhi and the rest of the Brigade were going with her to help with the party and to find gifts. They insisted that I not come along since they wanted their gifts to be a surprise. Since I certainly had no reason to stay in the clubroom alone, I left for home early. It was a weird feeling going home at this hour. There were so many more people on the streets at this time. I'd forgotten about it.

When I got home, my mother once again made me continue packing. She was sure to scold me for getting so little done yesterday, and she kept a careful eye on me during the evening. I told her that my friends were coming over to help, but she didn't seem to believe me as she insisted on not making excuses for not packing. I got most of the clothes and a bunch of odd knick-knacks that I had collected over the years packed, and I also helped pack

most of the kitchen plates and utensils. I soon realized that boxes of plates were very heavy. I really should have stayed in the clubroom…

After many hours of back-breaking labor, I was finally able to lie down and go to bed. It took me a while before I was able to fall asleep.

I was roused from my sleep the next morning when a powerful force was applied to my chest, followed by a loud "Dammit Kyon! Get your ass up!" When I opened my eyes, I was startled to see the menacing scowl of Haruhi. I also saw that Nagato, Asahina-san, and Koizumi were also in my room.

"Wh… what time is it?"

"Idiot! It's almost 10 o'clock! I come here to do you a favor and this is how you treat me! How ungrateful!"

I sat up and put my feet on the floor while giving a huge yawn.

"Sorry… haven't been sleeping well lately…"

"No excuses!" yelled Haruhi with a finger pointed directly at my nose. "Get dressed and get to work. We have a lot to do before we go to the party tonight!"

It was then that the SOS Brigade began the arduous task of packing the rest of my family's belongings. The moving truck came a couple hours later, giving us a chance to start putting the heavy furniture into it. While Koizumi and I were taking care of that, the girls would get started on packing any of the smaller things into boxes.

It should be noted that most of the hard work was done by Koizumi and myself, while Haruhi spent most of the time barking orders at me. After about two hours, Tsuruya-san also showed up to help. She told us that the party arrangement would be complete by the time we

were done. I had hoped that we'd be done soon, as the moving was quickly exhausting me.

I later found out that boxes filled with books were way heavier than any other thing I had to lift before. I also noticed that Nagato was carrying a box full of books as well, doing so as if the box was only filled with pillows. Dammit, I wish I could do that. Heck, even Koizumi appeared to outperform me when it came to lifting stuff. Did he undergo some secret training under the organization? I refuse to believe that he's stronger than me.

It should be noted that my mother and sister were very grateful for the help my friends were giving. Haruhi insisted that it wasn't a problem and that they were glad to help. She's always so formal with adults. It was a pain trying to keep my sister from distracting us with her antics while we working. It seemed that seeing my friends here cheered her up a bit.

My mother insisted that my stuff would be loaded in last. It took about six hours before we finally finished. We left only the most basic essentials in the house. The place felt so different from what it did five days ago. I couldn't help but feel a little saddened by it.

Haruhi insisted that everyone go home and get cleaned up before we would meet up at our usual meeting spot at six o'clock. I had put aside some of my nicer clothes for this evening when we were packing. I figured I'd try to look my best for the party. I even put on some cologne that I had bought some time ago when I thought about getting a girlfriend. That was before high school I think. After messing around with my hair for a little while before feeling that it was fine no matter how I had it, I left the house to meet up with my friends one last time.

I had arrived about 45 minutes early. It's rare for me to be at the meeting spot first, but I just figured that this was simply because I was already awake and didn't have to fight the sleep monster in order to try and get up in time. I had waited only fifteen minutes

before Koizumi arrived. He was dressed in his usual business-casual clothes, including his sports jacket.

"Good to see you here early."

"Yeah…"

He stood next to me and looked up to the sky.

"Some wonderful weather we're having, huh?"

Well isn't that a cliché conversation starter?

"Yep…"

Neither of us said a whole lot for a couple minutes until I became curious about Haruhi's condition.

"She's doing slightly better than yesterday," said Koizumi. "However, there was another closed space last night. It was smaller than the one before. Perhaps she's coming to terms with what's happening."

Or she's in denial.

"Perhaps that is true as well. That is why the next few days after you leave will be crucial."

Let's not forget that without me there won't be anyone around to put her on a leash when she gets out of control.

"Perhaps I'll be more proactive about being the voice of reason."

Liar! You'll do no such thing. I know you espers would be too afraid of upsetting your "God".

It was then that Nagato arrived next. She was wearing a green colored turtle neck with a light green cardigan over it. She also had a light green shirt, dark green stockings and shoes. The outfit was complete with a green bow in her hair. It looked so cute on her I'd

forgotten that it was rare that Nagato ever wore anything other than her school uniform.

"Wow… that looks great on you, Nagato."

"Suzumiya-san insisted that I wear this," she said as if there was just the slightest tinge if embarrassment. I liked what I saw.

It wasn't long before Asahina-san also arrived. She was wearing a red dress with a light pink wool jacket over it and pink open-toed shoes with little flowers in the middle of them. She also had two red bows on each side of her head. I didn't need to say the she looked incredible wearing it.

"Sorry for arriving so late."

"No problem. We're stilling waiting Haruhi."

She gave me a warm smile when she came up to us.

"I hope we have a good time."

How could we not if you're here? I was looking forward to this party more than ever.

We ended waiting another twenty minutes for Haruhi, but she still hadn't arrived. I checked my cell phone for the time. Five fifty-six. Dammit, where the hell are you Haruhi?

It was only maybe thirty seconds after that thought that Haruhi had finally arrived. She was wearing a purple tank-top with frills at the top and bottom. She also wore a black vest jacket on top of that. A short black skirt with a belt that was gemmed in rhinestones matched well what she was wearing. Lastly, She wore purple and while leggings with black colored shoes. There was one other thing I had to note. She had her hair tied with purple ribbon in a… a ponytail! Does she know about my fetish? I remember the incident where she nearly rebooted the world almost a year ago in that closed space. I told her

about my fetish, and she was wearing a ponytail the next day… but she thought it was a dream… well never mind that. She… she looked good… yeah… When she came closer I could tell she even went through the trouble of putting make-up on. No wonder she took so long.

She seemed embarrassed at first, but quickly hid it once she got to us.

"Good, we're all here! Let's go!"

We took the bus all the way to Tsuruya-san's house. The mood on the way there was quiet. It seemed that no one could quite find something to say. Personally, I was okay with the silence. I really didn't want anyone to say anything cheesy for my sake. That would be embarrassing.

We soon arrived and met up with Tsuruya-san at her house. She was wearing a yellow low cut shirt with short jean shorts and boots. She greeted us with that smile that proudly displayed her fang.

"Welcome guys! We're ready to go!"

She then grabs a yellow party hat and puts it on my head.

"This party is for you, so you have to wear the hat!"

Oh, thanks. It's good that I spent 15 minutes messing with my hair so you could ruin it with a stupid hat…

"Be grateful, dammit!" yelled Haruhi. "You're lucky you're even getting a party."

I ignored Haruhi's nagging and entered the house. The house was decorated with all the usually party favors, from balloons to paper draping. There was a Karaoke machine set up as well as all kinds of finger foods for us to enjoy. Taniguchi and Kunikida arrived about a

half hour later. They were dressed casually enough, not that I actually cared what they wore.

We spent the first couple hours playing Karaoke while enjoying our snacks and drinks. I desperately tried not to have a turn at it, but Haruhi and Tsuruya-san insisted that I go up. I picked a song I knew and gave it my best. I don't think I'm really that great a singer, but the girls seemed pleased enough by my performance. Taniguchi went up multiple times, trying to impress the ladies, but it was to no avail. He's a crappy singer. It goes without saying that Haruhi's performances were flawless. She even went and sang the two ENOZ songs she sang at the culture festival. Tsuruya-san was pretty good herself and Nagato's voice was pitch perfect but lacked feeling as it usually did. Asahina-san tried her best. She was cute as she stammered out the words. Koizumi was a competent singer himself. Kunikida refused to sing, insisting that it was for the best.

When we were done, Tsuruya-san's servants served a cake. It was a large rectangle shaped vanilla cake make with vanilla icing. On the cake, the words "We'll miss you, Kyon!" were written on it along with everyone's names underneath it. I was really touched.

Haruhi insisted on cutting the cake herself. I noted that she cut a slightly larger piece for herself and, as if trying to hide her crime, went and gave me an equally large piece. Bad Haruhi! Don't think that you can bribe me with extra cake! Anyway, nobody seemed to mind or notice as there was more than enough for everyone.

When we were finished, Tsuruya-san announced that it was time for gifts. Everyone's gifts that were apparently bought yesterday were brought out. Tsuruya-san was the first to give her gift.

"I figure that it's going to be chillier up north. I know you won't need it right away, but I'm sure it'll come in handy later."

I opened the box to find a stylish down jacket complete with wool gloves and hat. It looked rather expensive. I thanked her graciously and went for my next gift, which was from Nagato. Her gift was a

book of Japanese Haikus. I'll admit that I'm not the poetic type, but I was nevertheless thankful for the gift and insisted I'd read the whole thing as soon as possible. Asahina-san came next with what appeared to be a thermos and a small bag of leaves.

"I… I know I won't be able to make tea for you anymore, so I thought I could give you some to bring with you. I also gave you some tea leaves that I picked myself. Hope you enjoy brewing them."

Oh Asahina-san. If I had even a gram of your tea making talent, I'd weep with joy. I will do my best to brew these well, but I'm certain I will fail.

Koizumi's gift was a watch with a leather strap. It was likely middling in value, neither cheap nor overly expensive. I thanked him for his gift and moved onto Taniguchi and Kunikida. Taniguchi handed me what appeared to be a magazine wrapped in paper. He insisted that I didn't open it. Typical Taniguchi. I'm pretty sure I already know what it is… As for Kunikida, he gave me a gift card and apologized for not being able to come up with a decent gift. No worries, it's the thought that counts.

It was then finally Haruhi's turn to give her gift. She seemed reluctant to give it to me. I could see it was a small rectangular box. After staring at it for a few more seconds, she handed to me while looking away.

"Here. I… I really wasn't sure of what to get you. It's not much, okay?"

I gladly took it and opened it up. To my surprise, it was an orange armband. On it were the words "Brigade Member #1". It even had its own pin to go with it. I smiled at Haruhi after taking it out of the box. I was actually pretty touched by it. Haruhi crossed her arms and blushed a bit.

"Once a Brigade member, always a Brigade member. Now you have a symbol of your membership wherever you go. I insist that you

where it everyday, even at your new school!"

Like hell that was going to happen. Nevertheless, I decided to humor her by putting on the armband.

"Thank you, Haruhi. I really like it."

She blushed again and looked away. I could tell she was feeling really awkward and to be honest, so was I. Luckily the tension was broken when Tsuruya-san ran up to all of us with a camera.

"Let's take a group photo of all of us together!"

We did just that. She got one of her servants to take the picture. Haruhi and I were in the middle of the group. I was wearing the armband and that stupid hat. I should've taken it off. I'd rather not look back at this and see myself looking like an idiot.

The party was now over. The five Brigade members were all being driven back in one of Tsuruya-san's limos. The somberness on the way to the party was dwarfed by the somberness on the way back. It was dark now, and the lights outside gave an eerie glow. It was a pretty miserable ride.

When we finally arrived at the station, we all gathered together one last time. Haruhi gave a look at each of us before declaring us dismissed. Koizumi, Nagato and Asahina-san quickly went their separate ways. Haruhi hesitated slightly before she too began to walk away. I took this as my cue to do the same. I began to walk to the direction where I left my bike. It wasn't long however before I heard a yell behind me.

"Kyon! Wait!"

I turned around to see Haruhi standing about a dozen meters away. She quickly ran up to me, grabbing me by the shoulders when she reached me.

"I don't want you to go!"

She appeared to want to say something else, but she stopped herself. She was breathing heavily and had swallowed hard before speaking again.

"It… it won't be the same… is all…"

She then turned her head away from me, as if she was trying to hide something. I wasn't sure, but I thought I saw what appeared to be a tear. I smiled at her in an attempt to cheer her up.

"It's okay, Haruhi. I'll keep in touch. And I'll be sure to visit during summer break. It'll be okay."

Haruhi turned back to face me. She gave a weak smile before nodding. She then starts wiping her eyes.

"My eyes are getting irritated…"

I chuckled lightly after she said that. I then waved to her as I started to walk away.

"Talk to you later, Haruhi."

"Bye…"

Her words… they sounded as if she was expecting never to see me again. She then started running away towards the direction of her home. I watched her until she was no longer in sight. I then slumped my way to my bike while carrying my gifts in a bag, and rode my way home. I guess twenty-four hours from now I'll be up north with my relatives…

… But I was wrong…

When I got home, I noticed that all of my belongings had been taken off the truck and put back in the house. I then saw my mother setting

on a chair, obviously waiting for me to return. It turns out my mother had different plans for me.

When my mother found out that my friends had gone to all the trouble of helping me pack and throwing me a party, she felt so guilt ridden that she was taking me away from them that she went and talked to my dad to see if there was a way that they could see to it that I stayed. After explaining herself, she handed me some money she had been saving. She told me that I should try and find a small place of my own. I knew that we weren't really wealthy enough to afford them doing this, so I insisted that I would find a part-time job to supplement whatever they could afford to give me. I thanked my mother up and down, being sure to tell her how wonderful she was. I then immediately picked up my cell phone and called Haruhi. I found it odd that when I had bad news, she was the last one for me to tell and when I had good news, she was the first. The other line was picked up by Haruhi, who sounded like she was just in the middle of… crying? No way… I'm imagining it.

"Hello?"

"Haruhi! I have the greatest news! It turns out I'm not moving after all!"

She paused for a second before answering.

"What?"

"My mom decided to have me stay here! She gave me money to find a place for me to stay and everything! I'll probably have to work to make ends meet, but I'll be able to stay in the area!"

Haruhi was silent for a few more seconds before he finally… spoke…

"You bastard! Do you have any idea what you put your Commander through these last few days?! How can you possibly be so

insensitive?! After all we did for you today! You have a lot of explaining to do!"

What's there to explain? I told you everything. Typical Haruhi. I guess I shouldn't be surprised. This whole ordeal was anti-climatic. Although I knew that on the inside she was probably really happy.

"We're having an emergency meeting of the SOS Brigade tomorrow! Nine A.M. sharp! You better be there, Kyon, if you want any hope of making it to next sunset!"

It was then that she hung up. I couldn't help but felt that she overreacted a bit, but I guess she wouldn't be Haruhi if she didn't do that. I got onto my bedroll, which was considerably less comfortable than my bed, and went to sleep.

The next morning, I said my goodbyes to my sister and my mother. My sister was heartbroken to hear that I wasn't leaving with her. She grabbed onto my leg and wouldn't let go until the combined effort of my mother and me finally got her off. After that, I gave my mother a hug and bid her farewell. She told me that I had only a couple days left before I had to vacate the house. I told her that I could stay at a friend's house for the time being until I got on my feet. With that, she and my sister, along with all their possessions, were gone.

I looked at my watch that I got from Koizumi. It said nine thirty… Crap!

I arrived at our usual meeting place by just before ten. Haruhi and the others were sitting there looking bored and impatient. When I came in site of them, I could hear Haruhi screaming at me. Yep… I'm dead…

"You have a lot of nerve showing up an hour late! Double penalty! Triple penalty!"

I apologized profusely to everyone, telling them that I was held up saying goodbye to my family. Haruhi blinked upon hearing this.

"Really? They're really gone?"

"Yep."

"I'll miss your little sister. She was a real sweetie."

Were you really angry at me at all? You're definitely not showing it now.

"Forget about your sister. We're here to discuss your current situation. And you better believe that you're buying!"

"I know… I know…"

We got together at the coffee shop where we usually get together. After buying everyone's drinks I explained the current situation to everyone. I couldn't help but notice that Asahina-san seemed completely unsurprised by the fact that I was still here. Koizumi looked especially relieved, and I could sense the same relief in Nagato, but Asahina-san was different. Did she know this whole time that this is what would happen?

"I had a feeling things would work out."

A feeling my ass! You knew this whole time! Damn time travelers and the fact that they know the future!

Anyway, when I was finished, I relayed the fact that my next goal was to find a place to stay. I knew that living alone wouldn't be a problem for me. After all, Nagato, Koizumi and Asahina-san had been doing it for more than a year now.

"Unfortunately, I don't have a lot of money coming my way, so I'm going to have a hard time finding a place I can afford."

"That could be a serious problem," said Koizumi. "Rent isn't cheap. Perhaps there's something I can do to help you…"

No thanks! I'd rather not have your "help".

"I'm not sure if I can really help you, Kyon," said Asahina-san sheepishly. "If I could, I'd be happy to."

"I appreciate it. If I don't find a good place to stay, I might have to move up north anyway."

It was then that Haruhi slammed her hand on the table.

"It's decided then!"

What's decided?

"Kyon, you're going to live with me!"

And there we have it. We're finally to the premise of the story. Next chapter, we'll finally meet Haruhi's parents.

Chapter 4

Thanks for all the reviews I've gotten for this story so far. I really appreciate the advice. I know that my biggest criticism has been stupid errors in spelling and grammar. It's not that I don't know spelling and grammar. It's just that while I'm typing my hands go into auto-pilot a bit, and sometimes they type out things I don't want. :P

Finally into the meat and potatoes of the story. I don't expect this chapter to be as long as the last one. Hope you're okay with that.

Chapter 4

"Kyon, you're going to move in with me!"

It took me a moment to let her words sink in. I think that part of me understood what she said quite clearly, but the other part of me wanted… no needed to believe that I had only misheard her. So, like an idiot, I said "What?"

"You heard me, Kyon! You should move in with me. It's obvious that no one else can really help you, and you can't really afford your own place. I have a guest room you can stay in at my place. That way you won't have to get a job which would interfere with Brigade activities. It'll be perfect!"

While your logic in the last statement was sound enough, you're forgetting a few crucial factors. I'll illustrate them right now…

Factor One: I'd be living with you. Do you have any idea how stressful it is dealing with you for as many hours a week as I do? I need a break from you every once in a while. It bad enough that I'm

around you every school day, not to mention the weekend excursions around the city.

Factor Two: I'm a boy. You're a girl… Okay? I really don't want to go into details about this one. Call me old-fashioned, but I just don't think it's right for people of opposite sexes to live in under the same roof if they're not married or dating.

Factor Three: Remember that it's not your house. I'm pretty damn sure that your parents are going to say something about me living there. In fact, now that I think about, do I even want to meet your parents? Anyone that could raise a person like you… I need to stop… the thought is too scary…

Factor Four: I'll be living with YOU!!! I know I said this already, but I cannot state it enough.

"Don't worry about my parents. I'm sure I'll be able to talk them into letting you stay."

Obviously, once again, you refused to listen. I stated three other factors… well technically two but never mind that!

"It's settled then! You're going home right now to get your things ready while I get my place ready. I'll be over at two. You better be ready!"

And just like that, I'd been bullied once again into doing something I didn't want to do. I mean sure, a lot of guys would jump at the idea of living with an attractive girl. They read those stupid manga of two strangers living under one roof, having crazy things happen to them before finally falling in love. But this is reality, and those kinds of things never happen. Besides, I'm sure Haruhi's parents will say no anyway, and we'll be done with it.

Before leaving Haruhi had one more thing to say. "Kyon, since you're not leaving after all, you have to return all of the gifts everyone gave you. It's only fair that way."

Since when were you the judge of what's fair. I looked at Koizumi, Asahina and Nagato. They all insisted that I keep their gifts. Haruhi on the other hand…

"I want that armband back!"

"Do I really have to? I kinda liked it."

"Yes! My original plan was to have to use it to advertise at your new school so you could create a new branch of the SOS Brigade there."

Yeah right. Like that was ever going to happen…

"But since you're not going anywhere, there's no need for you to have an armband. We already know where you stand in the Brigade!"

Well using that logic, you shouldn't need to wear one either. It's not like we have any confusion about your standing in the Brigade.

"It's different in my case. I'm the chief of the Brigade. I need something to allow me to stand out."

There are few people in the universe that stand out as well as you do, but nevertheless I really don't want to give my armband back.

Haruhi stared at me with narrowed eyes for about half a minute before sighing loudly.

"Fine, keep it. But you have to wear it whenever I order you to!"

Do I really have a choice? Anyway, with that said we all decided to leave the café. After we went our separate ways, Koizumi walked up beside me. I figured he'd have something to say.

"Well, this turned out to be an interesting set of events."

Interesting? To say the least, Captain Understatement.

"To be honest, I was expecting today to be the worst day of my life. I'm terribly glad that things worked out differently. I can't help but get the feeling that Suzumiya-san wished for something like this to happen."

Oh God, please don't go suggesting that this is all her fault… well even if it is, it's incredibly inconvenient to think that my destiny could change at the drop of a hat like that. I'd rather believe that this is a coincidence.

"And perhaps it is. I'm only speculating. I'm sure it goes without saying that her emotional state is exponentially better than it was the entire week before."

"Yeah…" was the best I could come up with after what he said. It was then that a thought had crossed my mind "Koizumi, do you know anything about Haruhi's parents?"

Koizumi stopped walking and smiled at me with that incredibly annoying smile.

"It goes without saying that studying Suzumiya-san requires some knowledge about her parents as well. In fact, there is a small faction in our Organization that looks upon them with some reverence. After all, they did create her, so to speak."

As creepy as that is, I couldn't get images of Catholicism and Mother Mary out of my head. I couldn't begin to imagine what it would be like to give birth to a God…

"What are they like?"

Koizumi's smile grew even larger and more annoying.

"I think it's best for you to find out yourself."

And with that, Koizumi began to walk away. Why wouldn't he say anything? All of a sudden, I found myself becoming deathly afraid. I

wonder if it's not too late to move up north anyway. I looked at my watch and realized that my mother would likely be hundreds of kilometers away by now. Damn…

I finally got home and, seeing as all my stuff was technically already packed and ready to go, decided to lie down and take a nap. I was still beat from all the sleepless nights and packing from earlier this week. I got back on my futon and was quickly asleep before I knew it.

I was awoken by the sound of loud banging at my door. Behind the door, I could hear the voice of an irate teenage girl screaming at the top of her lungs. Oh boy, I can't wait to be living with her… if that even happens.

I finally opened the door after wiping the sleep from my eyes to find Haruhi's scowling on the other side.

"About time! Were you sleeping? How lazy can you be?"

"My stuff was already packed, so there wasn't anything for me to do."

"Whatever… get ready! We're leaving now!"

"Did your parents say it was okay?"

"Quit wasting time with unimportant questions! Get your suitcase and get going!"

Unimportant questions? I'm pretty sure it's damn important that your parents agree to me living there. After all, if I have to bring my stuff back after finding out I can't live there, then that would be a real waste of time.

"We'll come for the rest of your stuff later. Let's go!"

With that, I grabbed my bag and began to follow Haruhi all the way to her house. I have never been there even once since I've met Haruhi, a fact that was made painfully obvious during the events of

her disappearance when Nagato changed the world. I was a little curious about what such a place would look like, but more than that I was terrified. I began to imagine the most twisted and horrible place imaginable. A place only a demon would want to call home. Yep, that had to be it.

Haruhi didn't have her own bike, so I was forced to walk the whole distance there, which I had to admit sucked pretty bad, but it was still manageable. It took almost an hour to get there. When we did, I was greeted by the site of a typical two floored, western-styled house with white colored siding. In other words, it was completely normal looking. I wasn't sure whether I should be relieved or disappointed. Am I nuts?

We soon entered the house. After taking off our shoes, I was given the opportunity to see the inside… which also appeared suspiciously normal. Everything was clean and well furnished. I noticed that the living room had a lot of baseball paraphernalia. I could only surmise that Haruhi's father was a baseball fan… Wait, didn't Haruhi tell me she was taken to a baseball game with her father once? Right, that makes sense. Maybe her father's a pretty normal guy after all.

Haruhi turned to me and told me to wait in the living room. She then walked into the kitchen, where I assumed her parents were. It was then that I heard this statement.

"Mom, Dad, I have a really big favor to ask you…"

Wait, what?! You mean to tell me you haven't even asked them yet? What were you thinking? Do you have any idea how bad this is going to look?

"You see, there's this… friend that recently became homeless and my friend needs a place to stay."

This is going to end really badly. As soon as they find out that this friend of hers is a guy, I'm probably going to get my ass kicked by

her dad… and maybe her mom, too. Then I'd have to make the trek back to my house with all kinds of injuries. That would suck big time.

"I was wondering if we could let them stay here."

Okay, this is the part where they say no, and I can go home. I'm sure Haruhi will probably fight with them for a bit, but I doubt they'd change their mind. I'd go home and forget all about this silly idea. Yeah… except when I heard what appeared to be Haruhi's parents, they didn't sound completely against the idea. They sounded more… unsure. It was then that Haruhi peeked her head into the living room and waved me in. Oh crap… here we go…

My heart was pounding in absolute terror. I took a deep breath and slowly walked into the kitchen. I decided to try and pull an Asahina-san and make myself look as humble as possible as I made myself visible. I kept my eyes on the floor, afraid to even look at them. I bowed deeply before speaking.

"I'm terribly sorry for inconveniencing you. This was Suzumiya-san's idea to do this. I'll understand if you are against the idea."

I rarely if ever refer to Haruhi as Suzumiya-san, but since I was trying to be extra polite and formal it seemed necessary. To be honest, I was extremely uncomfortable acting like this. I don't know how Asahina-san does it all the time.

I had managed to get a quick glance at the both of them. Haruhi's mother had long brown hair, much like Haruhi did when we first met. I couldn't make out her eyes as she was giving a Koizumi like smile, only her smile was warm and gentle where as Koizumi's was fake and annoying. She was actually an incredibly lovely woman, exhibiting a charm not too different from Asahina (big).

Haruhi's father had short, black hair with eyes matching Haruhi's. He had the build of a man who stays in very good shape. I guess you could say he was a handsome guy, not that I'd really know. Both of them looked way too young to be the parents of a teenage daughter.

However, unlike his wife, his expression could best be summed up with one word… unamused. This was made even more obvious by the fact that he put his newspaper down and crossed his arms.

"I see…"

Haruhi decided to continue to introduce me. "This is my friend. His name is Kyon. We've been classmates since we both started high school, and we're in the same club."

Damn you Haruhi! Did you have to tell them that stupid nickname? I made sure to tell them my real name after Haruhi was done talking. Haruhi's father continued to stare me down while her mother smiled innocently at me. The room was silent for about a minute before the silence was finally broken by the following statement, care of Mr. Suzumiya.

"Absolutely not."

There we go. Just as expected. Can I go now?

Unfortunately, his authority was challenged shortly after all not by Haruhi, but her mother.

"Oh, why not? He seems nice enough. We can't let him be cast out into the streets."

Great, now those two are about to argue. Just what I wanted to see…

"I'm not letting some boy I don't know live under the same roof as my daughter. It's out of the question!"

It now Haruhi's turn to object. Yay…

"He's not like that at all! You're over reacting!"

I decided to butt in, trying to defuse the situation before it got out of hand.

"It's okay if you don't feel right about me staying here. It really was too much to ask. I do have a little money. I can just find my own place. I'm really sorry for wasting your time."

"How much money do you have?" asked Mrs. Suzumiya.

"Um… about 40,000 yen. That's what I'm expecting to receive every month. I was planning on getting a part time job to supplement that."

"You can't expect to live off that little money," said Mrs. Suzumiya before turning to her husband. "Can't you reconsider?"

Mr. Suzumiya now had his hand folded together in front of him. He was still staring me down though. "Where are you getting this money every month?"

Damn, he got me. I know what he's going to say next. As soon as I tell him my parents are sending me the money, he'll ask why I don't just live with them. I could see in him a man with street smarts. Someone who has been in a lot of situations where one would have to rely on instincts and quick reasoning skills to survive. If this was a game of chess, I would be in check right now with my next move almost certainly lead me into a checkmate. Since I really didn't want to play this game, much less win, I decided to play into his hands. "My parents…"

"Why can't you live with them?"

Before I could answer, Haruhi interrupted me. "He can't because… of certain extenuating circumstances."

What are you doing? Don't tell me you're going to lie about my situation. Please don't do that. I can only foresee bad things happening because of it.

"Such as?"

"Well… his father recently lost his job and they couldn't afford to live at their place anymore so they had to move in with relative, but there was no room for Kyon so he had to stay behind."

"They can't afford to stay in a place of their own, but they can afford to send 40,000 yen a month to him?"

Haruhi paused realizing she was busted. See? I knew you were going to screw it up. Thanks, but no thanks for the "help". It was then that I explained the actual situation to them, assuring them that my reason for staying wasn't urgent or anything. My mother just felt bad about forcing me to transfer schools when I had so many friends. Nothing all too special.

Mrs. Suzumiya appeared touched by my situation. "What a wonderful thing for your mother to do." She turns to her husband once again and pleaded with him. "Oruki, you can't be so mean. It's so unlikely that he'll find a place that affordable. I'm sure we can have him help around the house. Please?"

Oruki-san was beginning to rub his temples, a clear sign that he was buckling under the pressure. Wait, no! I don't want to stay here! Please don't change your mind!

"Come on Dad! We can just charge him rent. We could use the extra money."

"Our finances are none of your business," said Oruki-san as he buried his face in his hands. After about half a minute he looked up. "You can stay here for a month. That's it! In that time you need to find your own place. You will be expected to pay some rent and help out around the house in that time. And so help me…" He then stood up, his finger pointing directly at me. "If you do anything that I don't like in the slightest, you'll be out the door so fast you won't have time to flinch before your face eats asphalt. Got it?!"

After I nervously nodded, both Haruhi and her mother exclaimed in joy. Mrs. Suzumiya got up from her seat and finally properly

introduced herself.

"I'm Naru Suzumiya. Welcome to out home. I hope we all get along well." She then leaned in close to me and whispered into my ear. "I'm sorry my husband was so mean. He doesn't usually take kindly to strangers. He'll warm up to you in time."

After that, I felt a powerful tug on my collar as I was soon dragged out of the kitchen and then up the stairs in the living room. It didn't take long before I realized it was Haruhi. Who else would it be? She dragged me to what appeared to be a bedroom. It was painted green and lacked anything other than a bed, dresser and nightstand. Obviously this was the guest room.

"You're staying here!"

No kidding. I could have figured that one out on my own.

"Don't give me that attitude! You should be grateful that I went through all the trouble to do this!"

If there is anyone I should be grateful to, it's your parents. More specifically, your mother. She's the real reason I have a place to stay, even if it's only for a month. She's so sweet, nice and thoughtful. I can't even begin to imagine how she could be your mother.

Haruhi crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes at me. "Don't think that it'll be fun and games now that you're here. I'll be sure to keep your lazy butt busy while you're here. No excuse! Those are direct orders from your leader!"

"Yeah, yeah I get it. Are you done? I'd like to try to get settled in my new surroundings."

She turned around and began to walk out. Just before she did, though, she added one more thing. "By the way, you are absolutely, positively, one-hundred percent not allowed in my room without

permission! And you are not to touch anything when you are in there!"

That's pretty much standard common courtesy, not that you'd know anything about that.

When she finally left, I closed the door behind her and lied down on what was for the time being my bed. I stared up at the ceiling, feeling a bit uneased by the situation. I really didn't want to live here, but I guess I can't turn down a roof over my head. At least it's only for a month. I'm not sure I could take more than that living with Haruhi.

The one thing I was both surprised and grateful for was the fact that Haruhi's parents seemed so normal. Her father's a bit rough, but not a weirdo. And her mother? She was a breath of fresh air. She could be my Asahina-san when I'm not in the clubroom. I could almost fantasize the both of them… wait, I should stop. She is married after all and bit old for me. I'm not really a MILF person to be honest.

Anyway, I couldn't fathom how someone like Haruhi could come from either of them. Was she adopted? No… I could see the resemblance she had to both her parents. It doesn't matter anyway. I don't think I could stand living with that many weirdoes…

If only I knew then what I know now… I would have been much more worried…

There we have it. Hope you enjoyed the chapter. If you need a reference for what either of Haruhi's parents looked like, think of Oruki as looking a bit like Mr. Hiragi (Kagami and Tsukasa's dad) but with more of Haruhi's face and darker hair, and Naru as Miyuki's mother but with long brown hair instead.

We will definitely see more of their eccentricities next chapter. :)

Chapter 5

Finally we move on to chapter five. I'm blown away with how many reviews I'm getting for this story. At this rate this chapter might just make this story surpass any other story I've ever done and with fewer chapters to boot. Considering that Melancholy isn't quite as well known on this site as DBZ or Evangelion, that's saying something. I quite glad you guys are enjoying my work. I hope you continue to enjoy it. It's the longest chapter yet!

Oh and a WHOOOOOOHOOOOOOOOO goes out in celebration of Haruhi season 2 finally arriving! YAAAAAAAAY!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Chapter 5

They say that the average person will sleep between seven to nine hours a day if they had no alarm clock. It is during this time period that our body becomes busy restoring any damage it has suffered previously and restoring your nervous system's supply of much needed neurotransmitters. Adequate sleep also improves immune function, increases energy, and even slows aging ever so slightly. With all these benefits, it's a mystery as to why it is that some people insist on living their lives without a proper amount of sleep, let alone allowing others that luxury.

These are the thoughts that quickly raced through my head when I became painfully aware of the sensation of something bashing my head into my pillow. And judging from the suspected shape, size, texture and approximate density of that thing, I soon determined that it was a foot. It wasn't long before my suspicions were found correct.

"Dammit, Kyon! Get your ass up!"

Being woken up violently by my sister had pretty much been a morning ritual for me for many years, so I was kind of used to this. For some reason, I wasn't terribly surprised that Haruhi would happily continue this ritual in my sister's stead. Some things never change.

"Come on! You've been sleeping since you got here! Fifteen hours! You should be ashamed of yourself!"

Wow, had I really been asleep that long? Then why do I still feel sleepy?

Haruhi moved her foot down to the small of my back and bashed it hard, which hurt pretty damn good I must say.

"OW! Alright I'm up!"

"About time! I swear it's like you go into a coma whenever you fall asleep!"

I reluctantly sat up and yawned loudly, following that up with a large stretch. I looked up at Haruhi, who was still wearing her yellow pajamas.

"I can't help that I'm a heavy sleeper."

"Well hurry up and get dressed so we can eat before we have to leave."

She turned to walk out but stopped at the door.

"By the way, did you finish your homework?"

Homework? Crap! I forgot all about it… what with all that happened all weekend.

"Of course you didn't… You're as useless as always. You can copy my homework while you're eating."

"You don't have to do that. I'm sure I can talk our teacher into giving me an extension, considering what had happened."

"Just get it done now and get it over with. Beside, I know you won't be able to do it on you own anyway, considering the fact that you didn't even try to pay attention in class all last week."

Well, she's right about that… I hate it when she's right…

"Hurry up!"

With that, she stormed out of my room and slammed the door. Luckily, Haruhi had the presence of mind yesterday to make sure that I'd remembered my school clothes when I came here. After about five minutes, I was dressed and ready to go. I walked downstairs to find that Haruhi had already beaten me to the kitchen.

"God you're slow! No wonder you're always late for Brigade meetings!"

"Whatever…"

Haruhi handed me her homework and set me to get to work copying it while she prepared breakfast. She grabs some instant food from a cupboard and quickly heated it up before serving it.

"If you weren't so slow we could have had a real breakfast. Don't blame me if it tastes like crap."

Hey, it's instant. As long as it doesn't kill me I could care less.

It was then that Haruhi's mother Naru-san walked in the kitchen, still in her pink colored pajamas, while rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

"Good morning… did you get enough sleep? You must have been real tired to sleep as long as you did."

I smiled politely before greeting her.

"Good morning Naru-san. I appreciate your concern. I'm quite fine, thank you."

"Well that's wonderful," she said with that warm, innocent smile. Her radiant energy soothed my soul. Perhaps living here won't be so bad after all.

In the corner of my eye, I could see Haruhi raising an eyebrow at me. She's probably thinks it's weird to see me so damn polite and formal. Hey, I can be those things if I wanted to.

It was then that Oruki-san walked into the kitchen as well, holding today's newspaper. He narrowed his eyes upon seeing me, and then he gave a cocky smile.

"Good morning, Haruhi-chan. Good morning, Kyon-kun."

"G… good morning," I said, bowing to him while still in my seat… Wait a minute! Did he just call me Kyon? Dammit, I told you my real name!

He then walked up to where I was sitting and eyed the homework I was doing.

"Doing your homework at the last minute?"

Oh great… I'm sure this is making me look good. Now I look like a huge procrastinator. Well, I technically am, but I didn't want him to know that. Luckily, Haruhi was quick to answer her father for me.

"He wasn't able to finish it because I all the stuff that happened to him over the weekend, so I'm helping him."

He then clearly sees that I was just copying her homework.

"I can see that…" He then begins to walk to his seat. "Keep up the good work… Kyon-kun…"

Well that statement wasn't sarcastic. And I love the fact that he's using my stupid nickname to mock me. He hates me… he really hates me…

"Oh! That reminds me," said Naru-san as she grabbed a piece of paper and began to write something down. "I need you two to stop at the store to grab some things on this list." She then handed Haruhi the list along with some money.

"Okay," said Haruhi as she finished her breakfast at record pace as usual. The morning was so damn normal. I still can't comprehend how those two could raise such a strange daughter.

After I finished breakfast and copying homework, Haruhi and I left for school. If there was anything to be thankful for, it was the fact that Haruhi lived considerably closer to the school than I used to and that the hill wasn't nearly as steep from the direction she went to school. That'll be nice for a change. After over a year of climbing that hill from the steep end, going Haruhi's path would feel like a breeze.

Still, I'm getting the feeling that I'm probably not going to be there for much longer, considering the fact that Haruhi's dad seems to dislike me so much. Apparently, my thoughts were fairly transparent, because Haruhi made a comment about it soon afterwards.

"Don't worry about my dad. He's a jerk to everyone except his family and students."

Students? What is he a teacher?

"Oh, I didn't tell you? My father earns a living teaching women's self defense courses."

Teaching women's self defense? Wait, that means he could probably seriously kick my ass if he wanted to right? That's just great…

Haruhi continued to explain that her father went into business teaching the courses right around the time that Japanese women

began to leave the household and enter the business world, which made the timing perfect. He's done well enough that he only has to work a few hours a day during the weekdays to meet the family's financial needs, although competition with others has reduced the influx of new students by a bit, making it a little harder for them to make ends meet.

Haruhi rarely ever said anything about her life at home, so this all came as a bit of a surprise, but since I'm living with them now, I figured that maybe she felt it was okay for me to know what was going on.

It wasn't much longer after she began explaining things about her dad that I noticed a familiar face come in to view. To be honest, I wasn't terribly thrilled the meet him like this.

"Oh, hey Kyon! Why are you still here?"

It was Kunikida. Although between him and Taniguchi he was definitely the less annoying one, I still didn't want to see him during this time. This was mostly because…

"And why are you walking to school with Suzumiya-san?"

… of that…

"Kyon's staying at my place for now."

Thanks, Haruhi. Announce it to the world while you're at it. To be honest, I had hoped that no one would find out that I was living with you. Although it's nothing new to have rumors spread about the both of us, it's still annoying as hell.

"Oh calm down. It's not like it's a big deal. Who cares what people think?"

Obviously not you. You've made that abundantly clear to me ever since you made your infamous introduction speech at the beginning

of our freshman year.

"So you're not moving up north? Why not?"

I decided that since the cat was out of the bag now, I might as well explain. I told him that living at Haruhi's house was a one month deal until I found my own place.

"Wow, that's cool. I sure wish I could live on my own."

So do I. I'm certain that living with Haruhi will get to me eventually.

The three of us continued to walk to school, making the usual small talk until we got there.

The rest of the first half of class was nothing too unusual, and it flew by fairly quickly. Haruhi left the classroom like she always did, leaving me with Taniguchi and Kunikida to eat lunch… oh crap…

I just realized that I didn't have a lunch to eat. Haruhi always ate in the school's cafeteria so she never brings one, and I forgot about it in my rush out the door.

"Don't worry, Kyon," said Taniguchi. "I'd be happy to share my lunch with you."

Since when have you ever been so generous?

"But only under one condition…"

Of course…

"You have to give that gift I gave you at the party back. Since you're not leaving after all."

Oh yeah, that thing. I was ordered by Haruhi to give all the gifts back anyway. To be honest, I really didn't want to look at it.

"So what happened anyway? Why are you still here?"

"Kyon's living with Haruhi now."

Thanks Kunikida. I totally wanted Taniguchi to know that. Now everyone will know…

Taniguchi gave a mischievous smile upon hearing this.

"So Kyon decided to skip the dating stage and went straight to living with her? Smart move. Dating is expensive and over-rated."

"We're not dating! I'm just using her guest room until I can find a place of my own."

"And her parents are okay with that?"

"As long as I'm out of there within a month."

"I wonder what her parents are like. They must be a bunch of freaks, too."

"They're surprisingly normal."

Kunikida then spoke up. "Really? I've heard some weird things from people in my neighborhood about them… especially her mother."

Wait? What did you hear? And how? Wait, that's right. Kunikida lives fairly close by to where Haruhi lives, right? That explains why we ran into him this morning. Never mind that. What are you saying about Haruhi's mom? Are you saying she's really a freak, too? Please tell me you're lying! I don't want the image of her sweet, innocent smile to be a lie!

"I don't remember exactly, but I heard she did some weird stuff around the neighborhood like performing strange rituals in front of everyone house. She said she was hoping a ghost or spirit was hiding in someone's house and wanted to have a normal conversation with one, I think."

"Sounds like Kyon has been around weirdoes for so long that he's forgotten what normal people are like," laughed Taniguchi.

That's not it, dammit. She wasn't like that at all when I met her. There must be a mistake. Maybe they confused her with Haruhi. That must be it.

The rest of lunch went by with nothing terribly note-worthy other than Taniguchi continuously teasing me about living with Haruhi. Damn he's annoying. When classes were over for the day, Haruhi and I made our way to the clubroom. After greeting everyone and receiving my daily dose of Asahina-san's tea, I sat down and played a round of checkers with Koizumi.

Haruhi immediately went to the computer and began to serf the web. From what I could tell from the corner of my eye, she appeared to be watching more videos online. She seemed to be watching something of particular interest. After a minute, a grin could be seen on her face as she continued to watch. Eventually, she jumped up in excitement.

"I think I might have found a real psychic!"

"Oh really," I said. "What makes you so sure?"

She clicked on something and stared at the screen intently while holding onto her chin in a position that made it look like she was deep in thought.

"I can't be sure, but this video I'm watching has this guy manipulating a compass with what he claims is the power of his own mind."

"That's quite interesting," said Koizumi. "Shall we take a look?"

Everyone, myself included, gathered around Haruhi as she replayed the video. We watched as the man she was talking about encouraged his audience to hold hands and focus their latent psychic powers to move the compass. While they held hands and chanted, the guy held his hand over the compass. Like magic, the

compass began to move around randomly. To be honest, I wasn't terribly impressed by it.

"I'm not convinced. Looks like a trick to me."

"Maybe…" said Haruhi, who appeared deep in thought. "But I can't for the life of me figure out how he did it. If it's not psychic power than what could it be?"

After we finish watching the video, everyone went back to their seats and continued doing what they were doing before. It wasn't until about ten minutes later that we heard a growl of anger from Haruhi.

"Damn you, James Randi! I should have known you would ruin it for me!"

Oh, him again? Are you telling me you still have a grudge again him? What did he do now?

Haruhi leaned back in her seat in exasperation. "That psychic was a fraud after all…"

"Oh really? How'd he do it?"

Haruhi goes on to explain that James Randi released response video to the one we just saw showing how the trick was done. Apparently the psychic slipped a small magnet into his thumb while he distracted the audience by telling them to hold hands. If you didn't watch him carefully, it was easy to miss. When he put his hand over the compass, the magnet was what made the compass move about. In the end, James once again did what he does best. He revealed a fraud. I bet Nagato saw it from the start.

However, Haruhi was less than appreciative of his work.

"Damn it! I've had it! That's the last straw!"

Haruhi then stands on her chair while placing her hands on her hips.

"The JREF have struck a massive blow against the SOS Brigade while we were caught unprepared! We cannot let such an attack go unanswered!"

How was revealing a hoax a blow to the SOS Brigade? Are you really that upset over the fact that the man in the video wasn't a psychic? And what exactly are you cooking up in that twisted brain of yours right now? Please tell me you're not serious…

"I will be spending the next few weeks making a plan for a massive counter-attack against the JREF. I told you that we are at war! We can't let ourselves be beaten! We will charge at the enemy and take them down with maximum brutality! We will take no prisoners! We will leave no survivors! Any objections!"

"Yeah, I got one…"

"Then it's settled! We attack on my command!"

And of course you refuse to listen to me. What a surprise… I just hope she forgets about this declaration and moves onto something else to distract her. I could only foresee bad things happening from this.

The Brigade meeting ended shortly after Haruhi's declaration, so Haruhi and I began to walk towards the bus station where we were going to take a bus to the market to grab the things on the list Haruhi was given.

When we arrived at the market, Haruhi pulled out the list and began to read it off. The list contained the typical items such as rice, soy sauce, eggs and fish, but as we continued shopping I noticed some of the items that were on the list were somewhat unusual. We bought fruit not commonly found in Japan, like plantains, pomegranates and rhubarb (I think rhubarb is a vegetable technically, but whatever). We bought several types of beans and

several different vegetables that were fairly rare and expensive in Japan. Eventually, I had to speak up to Haruhi about the food.

"Why are we buying all this different stuff?"

Haruhi then explained a little family tradition started by her mother. "My mother thought it was boring to eat Japanese food every night, so she decided that every night would have a food served from a different part of the world. Monday was Japanese, Tuesday was American, Wednesday was Hispanic, Thursday is Italian, Friday is African, Saturday is European and Sunday was Middle Eastern."

"I see…" I said, finding this behavior remarkably similar to when I first met Haruhi. Back then, she would come to school with a different hair style everyday, increasing the tie off points every day until it reset to zero on Monday. The ribbons she used in her hair were also colored coded based on the day. I couldn't help but wonder if Haruhi was influenced by her mother… oh no…

When we were finally finished with shopping, I was forced to carry everything myself all the way back to Haruhi's house, which sucked terribly since it was about 25 kilograms worth of food. This was made worse due to Haruhi's constant berating.

"Hurry up dammit! I want to get home! You're way too slow!"

"We'd be moving faster if you'd help me with these groceries."

"No excuses!"

This continued pretty much all the way until we finally made it back. My hands were throbbing from the plastic handles digging into my skin. After we entered the front door, I was greeted by Oruki-san himself. He had his arms crossed and had a stern look on his face.

"Haruhi told me yesterday while you were in dream land that you still had some stuff that you needed to grab at your old place. Is that true?"

"Yeah…" I said apprehensively.

"Let's go. We'll take the car and pick them up."

And like that, I was riding towards my old house with Haruhi's father. I had to admit that I was feeling very uncomfortable. I had thought about making small talk with him while we were on our way there, but I couldn't find the right questions to ask him. The look on his face spoke to me, saying "you better be grateful that I'm doing this." So as a result, we said nothing the entire way there, except for my occasional directions.

When we got there, I was in charge of loading all my stuff into the trunk on my own, while Oruki-san yelled at me to hurry up. Where have I heard that line before?

It took me about half an hour to get everything I had crammed into the car, including my bike which had to be tied to the roof. When that was finally over with we were on our way, saying good bye to my place for the last time. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, exhausted from both moving my stuff into the car and carrying the groceries earlier. I stayed this way for about five minutes, figuring that soon enough we'd be back at the Suzumiya residence, and I could relax in my room. Unfortunately when I opened my eyes, I began to notice that we weren't taking the route that we were supposed to take to get back. I began to become very nervous when I realized this.

"Um… where are we going?"

The fear began to ramp up dramatically when a saw a smile creep up onto his face.

"Don't worry. I figured we could stop somewhere to get some exercise before we go home."

Exercise? After what I just did? Are you crazy? And what do you mean by exercise? Where are we going? To be honest, this was

probably the most scared I've been since I got stabbed by Ryoko Asakura when I attempted to undo the changes Nagato did to the world.

It wasn't long before we arrived at a local dojo. Dojo? Just what is he planning for me? It was at this point that I decided to back out.

"Look… uh… Suzumiya-san? No offense but I'm not really feeling all that well…"

Before I could say anything else, the door on my side opened up, and I was grabbed by the collar and dragged out of the car with what amounted to an impossible level of force. I tried to resist, but it was to no avail. Haruhi's father was insanely strong, and I could do little other than let him take me wherever he wanted to take me.

We eventually came into the changing room before he let go of me. It was then that I saw that he was carrying a gym bag. After he opened it up, I saw that he had two separate karate gis.

"I'm sure that this one should fit you okay," said Oruki-san as he held up one in front of me. He then that a mischievous grin was seen on his face. I face that I know I've seen before. "Okay! Time for you to get undressed!"

It was then that Oruki-san attacked me and began to forcefully remove my school clothes. I tried in vain to resist, but it was like wrestling with an ogre. Before I knew it, I was stripped of both my clothes and my dignity and forced to wear the uniform… I felt so violated… I now know how Asahina-san feels.

Minutes later, we were both standing in the middle of the dojo in our uniforms. Oruki-san stood before me with his arms crossed and his eyes narrowed in my direction.

"As I said before, we came here for a little exercise, but more importantly, we're here to test you."

Test me? For what? To see how much crap I can take before I have a nervous breakdown?

"Relax. I just want to see the extent of your fighting capabilities."

Fighting capabilities? I doubt I'd perform any better than the average person. I'm definitely not at your level if that's what you wanted to know.

"I want you to throw a punch at me."

I paused momentarily to process his request. "Huh?"

"Look I'm sure you're pretty pissed that I stripped you and dressed you without permission, right?"

To say the least, yes.

"Then use that anger and let me have it! Hit me as hard as you can!"

What is he nuts? Okay, maybe he is. I'm really starting to believe that he's Haruhi's dad. There's no doubt about it. Okay, I get a free shot on him, right? Let's do this…

I reluctantly charge at him and swing at him with all my might… and that was all I could remember before I came to. I was on the floor with a severe pain in my chest. I could see Oruki-san standing above me looking unimpressed.

"I can't believe you fell for that. Were you even trying to avoid that hit?" He then held out his hand for me to grab. "We'll try that again."

Yeah, sure we will. I love getting pounded into bits. I got up on my own power, refusing his hand. Fool me twice, shame on me. When I got up, he was once again standing with his arms crossed.

"Go ahead. Try again!"

"No…"

"Try again or I'm kicking you out of my house!"

Are you serious? We both know what's going to happen. This is ridiculous. I know what you're trying to do. You're using me as a punching bag to let out your frustrations while also satisfying your alpha male ego.

"Did you say something?" asked Oruki-san in a tone that said "choose your next words carefully".

After telling him no, I swallowed hard as I got ready to strike. This time I was extra apprehensive, trying extra hard to find some kind of opening. I figured I'd try to throw him off by unleashing a kick…

I was on the floor again. My right cheek hurt really badly. Might have something to do with the fact that I landed directly on it when Oruki-san defended against my kick by grabbing my leg and performing some kind of flip that caused me to become airborne for at least a second. I slowly started to get up, but couldn't when a weight of Oruki-san's foot came onto my back. He then grabbed onto my arm.

"Next, I'll demonstrate some submission holds!"

Before I could object, I felt an incredibly painful force applied onto my arm in a direction it was never meant to go. Oh my god it hurts so bad! I remember screaming loudly in pain before he finally released me. I crawled away desperately up to the door. I tried to open it, but it was locked. I turned around to see Oruki holding a set of keys.

"Looking for these? You can't have them until we finish our lesson… or until you can grab them from me."

This is a nightmare! He's going to kill me! LET ME OUT OF HERE NOW!!!

"Next I'll demonstrate to you the wonderful world of pressure points!"

About an hour later, we were on our way home. My body was in all kinds of pain as I leaned my head against the window of the car. When I turned my head towards the driver's side, I could see that Oruki-san was quite pleased with himself.

"To tell you the truth, I put you through that because I wasn't sure if I could trust you around my daughter. But after going through that, I'm fully confidant that if you ever tried anything to her, she would kick your ass."

And here I thought I might make it to the end of the day with at least a shred of self-esteem. Thanks for taking care of that for me.

"I spent a great deal of time teaching her martial arts and putting her though physical training when she was junior high. She did a lot of acting out during that time, so I thought that if I gave her something to do to use up her energy that it might help correct her behavior. I was amazed with her talent, but she just didn't want to utilize it. To make matters worse, she still acted out despite my efforts."

He gave a deep sigh while rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"I'm just glad that she's gotten a lot better when she got into high school."

Interesting to hear about how Haruhi's parents reacted to her behavior when she got into junior high. I guess this also explains why Haruhi is in such great physical shape.

A short while later, we finally arrived at the house. Unsympathetic to my pain, Oruki-san made me unload my belongings into the house on my own, being sure to yell at me for being slow. While I was doing this, I couldn't help but notice that there were pieces of paper stuck to the walls all over the house. I knew those weren't there when I left this place over an hour ago. They had statements like "Welcome" and "Come here" on them. It was unbelievably bizarre. On my third trip, I noticed that it was Haruhi's mother who was putting up the weird pieces of paper on the walls.

After placing the third box into my room, I approached her to ask what she was doing.

"Oh! I'm just trying out a little experiment."

"Experiment?"

"Uh huh! I got this idea earlier this morning. I thought to myself that paper wards were used to keep spirits away all the time back in the day. I had this thought that perhaps I could make wards that drew spirits to us rather than away from us."

"Why would you want to do that?"

"Oh I'm such hoping that these will help make our home haunted."

"Wait… you want your house to become haunted?"

"That's right! Oh I hope we get a poltergeist. I think it would fun have to dodge objects being thrown at us!"

Uh… fun? No, ghosts are not fun. Ghosts are freaky. Ghosts are scary. Ghosts are unnatural. But most of all, GHOST ARE NOT FUN!

Obviously ignoring my objections, Naru-san began to bounce up and down excitedly.

"I sure hope this works! It can get so boring in here! I've always wanted to meet a ghost!"

It was at this point that I decided it was best to make my exit. "Well, I guess it's time for me to get back to work." I walked away as soon as possible to grab the next box.

During all this, both Haruhi and Oruki-san were carrying on with their own activities completely oblivious to what Naru was doing. Is this kind of thing so common that they don't even think it about it when it happens?

When I had finally finished moving my stuff in, I approached Haruhi for an explanation. She was sitting in the dining room doing her homework.

"Um… so… what's with your mother?"

Haruhi looked up at me strangely for a few seconds before figuring out what I was talking about.

"Oh, my mom has always had an obsession with ghosts and demons and what not. It's best to just let her ideas go their course. Nothing ever actually happens when she tries these kinds of things."

"As much of a relief it is to hear that, don't you worry she might do something out of control?"

Haruhi smiled and waved her hand away. "Nah, my mom couldn't hurt a fly. She just bored, that's all." Before I could say anymore, Haruhi pointed her pencil at my nose. "By the way, when do you plan on doing your homework? I'm not letting you loaf around so you can try can copy my homework in the morning."

"That was your idea."

"Doesn't matter. You made me look bad in front of my dad this morning because of that. I won't stand for it!"

If anyone looked bad this morning it was me. I told you I could have talked to my teacher and got an extension, but you wouldn't listen!

Haruhi pulled out the chair next to her. "No more excuses. Go grab your homework and get started. That's an order!"

After giving a deep sigh, I did as she commanded. I was already sore and exhausted after what had happened earlier today, so I knew doing my homework would be an arduous chore. Luckily, Haruhi was willing to give some pointers here and there on some of

the problems she already did. With her help, I was finished much quicker than usual and was free to relax for the rest of the day.

Soon it was dinner time, so I ended up having my first meal with Haruhi's family. It was Monday so it was Japanese night. Thank god! I don't think I'm quite ready to try the concoctions that would be made later this week. I found that eating dinner with the Suzumiyas to be a quiet affair, as both Haruhi and Oruki-san were too busy shoveling food down their throats to say anything, and Naru-san was happily in dream land while eating her meal. That innocent smile of hers was a source of great comfort for me yesterday, but now I was finding it strangely creepy. On the plus side, she was quite the cook, and the meal was delicious.

When dinner was over, I was forced to help clean the table and wash the dishes with Haruhi, as task I loathed only because Haruhi continuously berated me on how slow I was. After that I finally was excused to go to my room and relax for the rest of the day.

I pulled out a manga book that was at the top of a box I opened and began to read it to stem off boredom. After about ten pages were read, I started to hear a voice from behind the wall in my room… no wait… it must be my imagination. I went back to reading and I heard it some more. It sounded like a girl's voice. Okay, no need to panic. I'm sure there's a perfectly good explanation for it. I'm positive that it's not ghosts of spirits. There's no way those paper wards haunted this place already…

I got up from the bed and slowly walked towards the wall. As I got closer, the sound of the voice became clearer. When I put my ear to the wall, it was then that I determined the true source of the voice. I exhaled in relief when I realized it wasn't a ghost. Instead, it was Haruhi. But who the heck was she talking to?

Haruhi's room was adjacent to mine, and apparently the wall that separates us wasn't very thick. I decided to knock on it to she how she'd react. I heard a light scream when I did. I couldn't help but laugh when I realized I startled her. I then could hear the door to her

room open, followed by her heavy footsteps to my door. The door flew open, revealing Haruhi in a mood that was less than amused.

"What do you want?!"

"Who were you talking to?"

Haruhi's eyes widened before an obvious blush appeared on her face. "Sh… shut up! Idiot!" She then slammed my door and marched back to her room.

It was then that I laughed my ass off. I couldn't believe I caught Haruhi talking to herself. I remembered that she told be in the past that she had that habit, but I thought it came up as an excuse for her to ask me indirectly as to why I went out with Asahina-san the day before.

After enjoying that moment, I lied back down on the bed and continued reading. I was sure to note that the voices stopped. When I had finished reading, I dropped the book on the floor, shut off the light and went to bed.

To summarize today's events, I would say that my observations and assumptions of Haruhi's parents were grossly incorrect. They were not normal people. I've determined that Haruhi got her tomboyishness and bossiness from her father and her weirdness from her mother. It's no wonder as to why Haruhi is the freak she is. I honestly was not sure if I would be able to make it a full month with these people. I hoped I could find a place of my own soon.

Chapter 6

Okay, once again thanks for all your support. I've setup a forum on this site. Please feel free to comment there if that suits you. I'm pleased that Oruki and Naru are being well received.

This is my longest chapter yet, so onward!

Chapter 6

Have you ever had one of those dreams where either you do something horribly wrong or something terribly bad happens? And then for the rest of the dream you feel depressed or ashamed at what happened only to wake up later and realize it was never actually happened. Isn't that feeling the best feeling in the world?

I had one of those moments last night. I dreamt that I was out in the park with my cat Shamisen. We were walking around having a wonderful conversation (my cat was talking again) when a shovel suddenly appeared in my hand. For some reason, I started to dig up the ground and made a deep hole. I put my cat in the hole and started to bury him. After he was completely buried, I spent the rest of dream being sad that I buried the cat. It was bizarre…

Unfortunately, my moment of relief from my dream would come not in the comfort of my bed, but from the painful sensation of something hard hitting my butt repeatedly. I also felt something pulling on my collar. When I was startled out of sleep, I found that I was being dragged down the stairs. By a certain infamous girl no less.

Haruhi turned her head in surprise when she noticed I'd finally awoken. "It took you that long to wake up? What the hell is wrong with you?"

I should be asking you the same thing! Dragging me down the stairs like this… and my pants are starting to come off!

I fought Haruhi's grip while trying to pull my pants back up. It was really embarrassing, and my butt hurt really badly. She finally let go, but doing so had an unexpected consequence. I lost my balance and began to tumble down the stairs, taking Haruhi with me. She grabbed onto the railing just in to time to prevent her head from cracking on the step below, but she lost her grip soon afterward and tumbled down the stairs with me the rest of the way.

Luckily we only had a few steps to tumble down, but it still hurt like hell. I winced painfully for a moment before I regained my senses. It was then that I realized that I was right on top of Haruhi. We stared at each other awkwardly. I looked deeply into her eyes and felt myself becoming lost in them. I think I saw her blush as well. We were like this for about five or so seconds before a profound realization hit my head. We probably made a lot of noise falling down the stairs. Enough noise to wake up a certain someone's parents. If they walked out of their room to find myself and Haruhi in this provocative position… I'll stop right there. The pain was so great I could feel it even before it happened.

As I quickly got off of Haruhi, she was sure to berate me for falling on her. "Stupid, clumsy Kyon!"

"It was your fault for letting go."

Haruhi looked at me sourly as she got up. I had thought of helping her up, but changed my mind after she called me stupid and clumsy.

I then saw out of the corner of my eye that both of Haruhi's parents had exited the room, worried about the noise they'd heard.

"What's going on?" asked Oruki-san.

"Are you two okay?" asked Naru-san.

"We're fine. The idiot here fell down the stairs," said Haruhi.

As much as it irked me that I was the one being blamed for what happened, I played along knowing that it was better than telling them the truth. "Yep, clumsy me. Sorry if I woke you up."

"We're fine. You're not hurt are you?" asked Naru-san. She such a good person, it really make me want to forget that she's a weirdo, but the paper wards still hanging around the house serve as a constant reminder to know better.

"I'm fine. I've been through worse."

Like what happened last night… I'll never forget that in a million years. If I had been only a few seconds slower before getting up, that nightmare would have probably come ten fold this morning. It's hard to know sometimes if I'm lucky or unlucky.

The two older Suzumiyas made their way down the stairs and walked past me. I saw a nasty glared come from Oruki-san as he passed me and opened the front door to get the paper. He hates me… he really, really, really hates me…

It was then that Haruhi lifted my arm and took a sniff. "You stink Kyon. When was the last time you took a shower?"

Now that I think about it, probably Saturday before the party.

Haruhi's eyes widened. "Disgusting! Get upstairs now and get washed! If you hurry, you might still have time to eat and get dressed before we have to go!" She then proceeded to push me back up the stairs. The nerve of her pushing me back up the stairs after dragging me down them.

Haruhi showed me where the bathroom was and told me where the towels were kept before rushing back down stairs. Going through the bathroom was like looking into a window for the three of them. I noticed that there were three sets of razors, one obviously designed

for a man, the other two designed for women. The one the belonged to Oruki-san was on of those nice three bladed razors that I heard worked pretty damn good. The other two were for women to shave their legs. One was pink, the other was yellow. I assumed the yellow one was Haruhi's. I'm surprised that Haruhi would actually bother. The thought of her shaving her supple legs though… never mind that thought.

As I started taking my shower, I noticed that there were also three different shampoos to choose from. One was a lavender shampoo, which I figured belonged to Naru-san. I saw an unscented shampoo that was obviously Oruki-san's. I then picked up what I assumed to be Haruhi's shampoo, which was apple scented. I decided to use that one to wash my hair. I liked how it smelled.

When I was done, I opened the medicine cabinet to see if they had any deodorant. I knew it was rude to use someone else's deodorant without permission, but I figured they'd never know. I picked the one that was obviously made for a guy and applied it. I grabbed a towel from the linen closet and wrapped it around me before heading into my room to change.

When I was done, I made my way to the kitchen to find that breakfast was finished. It was a typical western-styled breakfast consisting of eggs, toast, bacon and even pancakes, and it smelled great. I bowed towards Naru-san to thank her.

"Thank you so much for making breakfast, Naru-san."

"Oh you don't need to thank me. Haru-chan was the one who made breakfast this morning."

Surprised, I looked at Haruhi, who seemed somewhat embarrassed.

"I was just that breakfast sucked yesterday and… I just felt like it, okay?"

I smiled at her as I took my seat. "Thank you, Haruhi."

I saw a light blush as she tried to look away. "Just hurry up and finish. I still need to get ready before we leave."

I couldn't help but notice Oruki-san lower his newspaper slightly to glace at both Haruhi and then myself. He narrowed his eyes at me when he noticed the look on Haruhi's face.

Desperate to try and get on his better side, I asked him a favor. "Um… since I'm only staying here a month… I figured it'd be wise for me to look in the paper for place for me to stay. I was hoping you could lend me the paper when you were done with it…"

Oruki blinked for a second before a smirk appeared on his face. He then pulled out the classifieds from the paper and handed them to me. I thanked him, folded them up and placed them into my school bag. As the four of us enjoyed our breakfast, which was probably the best breakfast I'd had in a while, Oruki-san decided to make an announcement.

"Listen up you two. I want you both home as early as possible today from school. I don't want you two spending all day at your club. I have some things around the house for you to do."

When he said "you", I knew he was really referring to me. After all, that was my agreement with them for staying here. I didn't want to be a freeloader, but I'd be lying if I said that I looked forward to coming back after school.

After Haruhi shoveled down the last of her food, she got up and darted up to her room. By the time she had finally finished getting dressed, I was finishing the last of my meal.

"Hurry up, Kyon! We're going to be late!"

I stuffed the last bites into my mouth and got up to go. I bowed to both Oruki-san and Naru-san before I turned to leave.

"Bye, Haru-chan! Bye Kyon-kun!" said Naru-san as I began to leave… wait did she call me Kyon, too? Dammit! Thanks a lot Haruhi…

Haruhi and I moved as swiftly as possible towards school to avoid being late. We weren't quite running, but our pace was anything but relaxed. We ultimately arrived to class with about three minutes to spare. After we took our seats, I got my school stuff ready for class. After a minute, Haruhi grabbed my hair and pulled me towards her.

"Ow! What are you doing?"

"Checking to make sure you washed properly."

"In the middle of school? Couldn't you have done that earlier?"

Haruhi didn't answer until after I heard her sniff my hair. "Apple?"

"Oh yeah. I used that shampoo earlier. I like how it smelt."

After Haruhi released my hair, I turned towards her to see that she had a large smile on my face. I guess it was the shampoo she liked.

When lunch time came, I gathered with the dynamic duo for our usual lunch ritual. I had pulled out the paper I was given earlier and was looking through it. By the way, I forgot to bring a lunch again. Damn I'm an idiot…

"Where the hell is your head lately, man," asked Taniguchi. "I bet you forgot the magazine, too."

"Yep…"

"Well, I'm not sharing this time. You won't learn unless you suffer."

"Thanks, I appreciate it…"

"So what's with the newspaper?" asked Kunikida.

"I'm looking for an apartment to live in."

"Ah… things not working out between you and Suzumiya-san?" asked Taniguchi.

"It's all three of them. I found out that Haruhi's parents are from Bizarro World, too."

"I knew it! There's no way normal people could raise someone like Suzumiya-san. So tell me what are they like?"

"I'd rather not get into it…"

I was only able to ignore Taniguchi pestering for so long. Eventually, I got up and went back to my seat and continued to search the classifieds. About twenty minutes later I noticed a Styrofoam container suddenly plop onto my desk with some food. I looked up to see that Haruhi had gotten me something to eat while she was gone.

"I remembered that you'd forgotten to bring a lunch, so I got you this."

I gave her a humble smile. "What's with you doing all these favors for me? At this rate, I won't be able to pay you back except through indentured servitude." Now that I think about it, that wouldn't be too different from what usually happens already.

"Oh, don't worry. I have every intention of making you pay me back ten fold. I'll think of some way for you to pay me back."

"I can hardly wait…"

I then noticed Haruhi putting her hand on her chin in deep thought, a mischievous smile slowly emerging. Oh joy, I can feel my impending doom already…

I was able to finish eating before lunch period ended. The class period continued on without much more than the usual lectures, although I had to say that Haruhi's help yesterday made a lot of

difference in allowing me to understand what was being talked about.

When classes were over, Haruhi and I made our way to the clubroom once again. I was sure to pull out the paper out on the way there, expecting to spend the time there continuing my search for apartments.

"Have you found anything yet?" asked Haruhi.

"Not yet."

Upon reaching the door, Haruhi opened it before I had since my hands were full with holding the paper, and I saw briefly the near nude form of Asahina-san. I quickly turned and apologized the moment I saw her. Normally, I would knock before I entered, but Haruhi wasn't held to the same standard and opened it without consideration.

After being allowed to enter, I took my usual seat and began searching the classifieds once again. I pulled out a pen so that I could circle any of the places that appeared promising. A couple minutes later, Koizumi entered the room and took his seat across from me. He was going to ask me to play another board game with me, but seeing as I was busy, he offered to play with Asahina-san instead, who happily agreed once she was done with brewing the tea.

I noticed Haruhi busily searching something on the computer. I secretly hoped it had nothing to do with the so called war we were supposedly having with the JREF. After about an hour Haruhi got up from the computer and went up to me.

"Find anything?"

"I managed to find three places that look hopeful. I probably won't have time to look at them until this weekend though."

"I'm coming with you when you go check them out."

I raised my eyebrow in Haruhi's direction. "Why do you want to do that?"

Haruhi then pointed her finger at my nose. "Because I expect certain standards for all Brigade members when it come to living quarters. I can't in good conscience allow anyone who considers themselves a member to live in sub-standard housing."

Whatever… although I get the feeling that you'll just complicate things.

Haruhi returned to the computer to do some more "research" which gave Koizumi an opportunity to whisper to me while he was trying to teach Asahina-san chess.

"So how are things at Suzumiya-san's house?"

I was reluctant to answer him. The memories of last night were best forgotten. "Well, I'm fairly sure weirdness is hereditary now."

Koizumi chuckled lightly. "Is that so?"

"Why do you think I'm trying so hard to find a place of my own?"

"It is true that Suzumiya-san's parents have their own ways of expressing themselves and that those behaviors maybe be unsettling to others, but the three of them do in fact share at least one quality."

"What? You mean besides weirdness?"

"They all are hardcore realists on the inside."

I looked at Koizumi like he had three eyes on his head. Realists? Right… realists that beat the crap out of helpless teenagers to boost their own ego, or attach paper wards to the walls in an attempt to

haunt their house… or create strange clubs designed to look for aliens, time-travelers and espers.

"You can say that people have always had a disconnect between their beliefs and their behaviors. Have you heard of the term cognitive dissonance?"

"Yeah…" I bet he's going to explain it to me anyway.

"When a person performs a behavior that conflicts with their personal beliefs, it leads to feelings that are very uncomfortable. To keep these feelings at bay, the person has two options. They can either change their behaviors so they don't contradict their beliefs, or reshape their beliefs so that they rationalize their behavior."

"And how does this apply to Haruhi and her parents?"

"Well, it applies better to Suzumiya-san and her mother really. They want to find the extraordinary. Each tries their own approach to finding those things. But they don't really believe they exist. They rationalize this by telling themselves that they want to prove themselves wrong. To them, the world would be boring if they were right in the first place. Do you understand?"

"I guess…"

I then went back to searching the classifieds, trying to give the message that I was done listening to his speech. It seemed to have worked, as he then went to preach to Asahina-san about the history behind the game of chess…

I am now back at the Suzumiyas. I was standing on a ladder looking at some disturbing gunk inside the gutters of their home.

"What are you waiting for?! Start cleaning!"

That was Oruki. Apparently my first task was to clean the gutters of their house. A task I knew I was going to loath. Don't I get any gloves for this?

"Where the hell are your balls?! Just put your hand in there and clean it up! It's not going to kill you!"

I stared ominously at the blackish goo before plunging my hand into it. The sensation of it was quite disgusting to my fingers. I then picked up a bunch of it and flung it over the edge. An audible plop could be heard as I did this. I moved to the next chunk of crap and repeated the same thing.

"Faster! You're going too slow!"

I had half a mind to take a handful of this stuff and fling it onto his face, but I knew doing so would result in my brutal murder, so I refrained from doing so.

"If you don't hurry up, I'll pull the ladder from underneath you!"

Anyone who didn't know any better would probably think he was joking. I knew better. In my short time staying here, I knew there was at least one thing that was true about him. Oruki was always dead serious. Another wonderful trait that he passed down to his lovely daughter…

I cleaned the gutters as fast as I could, which was a task made more frustrating by both Oruki's constant berating and by the sun beating down and making me sweat. I was then given the task of mowing the lawn. Oruki went into his garage to grab the mower.

"We do happen to have a gas powered mower, but I thought that you could use the exercise, so I'll have you use this instead."

He then pulls out an old-fashioned push mower… one that hasn't been used in quite sometime. I could see an evil grin on his face as he pointed to the location he wanted me to start.

"Get mowing!"

It's official. Oruki is a sadist. Mowing the lawn is a task that is loathed by anyone who actually has a lawn, but the task was made ten times worse by the fact that this damn contraption probably hasn't been oiled and cared for in quite some time. The lawn wasn't terribly big, but the task was still taking an eternity to accomplish. Pushing the mower was incredibly difficult, and damn near impossible whenever I came across a thick patch of grass. I'd have to move the mower back and forth several times before I could get through it. The only good thing out of all of this was that Oruki finally went inside, assuring me he would be back in a little while to check my progress.

I was only about halfway done when I heard Haruhi yelling at me from her bedroom window.

"Kyon, I need you to do something for me!"

Great, what now? Can't she see that I'm busy?

"I need you to take out the garbage!"

"Why?" I asked as I wiped the sweat from my brow.

"No questions, dammit! After all I've done for you the last few days, the least I expect is complete obedience when told to do something! Or did you forget who got you something to eat earlier today?!"

"Alright, I'll do it." I said as I dropped the mower on the ground and went inside to take out the trash.

I marched right into the kitchen and went straight to the garbage can. I removed the bag filled with garbage and began to make my way towards the door when I was stopped by Oruki.

"What are you doing?"

I swallowed nervously, wondering if I had done something wrong.

"I'm just taking out the garbage."

"And who told you to do that?"

"Haruhi…"

I could him rolling his eyes as he rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"Drop it."

I then put the bag on the floor before watching Oruki march up the stairs. It was only moments later that I heard yelling and arguing from upstairs. I could hear audible swearing as the too of them verbally squared off. For someone that grew up in a household that was relatively calm and relaxed, it was quite disturbing for me to hear such a nasty argument. After about a minute, the argument was over and I heard heavy foot steps make their way down stairs. I saw Haruhi quickly march towards the kitchen where she grabbed the bag from off the floor. She gave me a death glare as she picked it up and went outside to throw it out. What did I do? Don't use me as a personal servant to get yourself out of doing chores.

Oruki came down the stairs shortly afterwards and walked up to me.

"Just so you know, if you are supposed to anything around here, **I** will be the one to tell you. I don't know how Haruhi treats you when I'm not around, but in this household, **I** am the one in charge. I'm not going to let her get a free ride from doing her chores just because you're here. Got it?"

After nodding my head, I was told to go back and finish mowing the lawn. As I walked towards the door, Haruhi came back in and walked past me. She didn't even look at me while doing so. Great…

I had finally met someone that Haruhi couldn't boss around, but for some reason I couldn't enjoy the moment. I think it had something to do with the fact that Oruki was every bit as bossy as she was, and that even if Haruhi wasn't the one bossing me around, he would be.

And of course I would listen. Oruki had quickly become a member of the top five scariest people I've ever met. I wouldn't dare disobey him.

Oh, and Haruhi is on that list, too. Can't wait to deal with her wrath later…

Eventually, I finished the exhaustive task of mowing the lawn, after having to spend several extra minutes going over spots that I missed that Oruki's keen eye picked up. After I was done, Oruki said that was all for the day and that I was excused. I slowly walked back into the house, having had more than my fill of chores for one day.

Naru-san approached me as I entered and handed me a glass of something to drink.

"I figured you'd be thirsty after working so hard today."

I thankfully took the glass and brought it to my lips. I had initially thought that it was iced tea or juice, but when I felt the chunkiness and the god-awful taste, I realized it was something else altogether. I struggled to swallow down the gulp I took, trying to be as polite as possible.

"What is this?"

"It's a protein drink I put together. It should fill you with vigor after a full days work!"

I couldn't help but notice the usual warm, honey-sweet smile of Naru-san had an extra level of excitement upon speaking the last sentence. In an attempt to not be rude, I gulped down the rest of the concoction and swallowed it with all my will power.

"Thanks…"

"You're welcome," said Naru-san with all the sweetness in the world. Maybe she's not so bad after all. Still weird though…

"Did your paper wards ever work?"

Naru-san's smile quickly turned into a pout when I asked the question. I had to admit it was quite cute, but it was nevertheless strange to see a grown woman acting this way.

"No, I haven't seen anything strange happening around the house. I thought for sure it would work this time."

She then moved uncomfortably close to my face.

"I won't give up though! I'll find something that works! I swear it!"

I couldn't help but smile at her determination. "I'm sure you'll succeed in finding something worthwhile someday, Naru-san."

It was then that Naru-san displayed a smile that reminded me of Haruhi's million-watt smile. "Really?! Thank you, Kyon-kun!"

She then gives me a big hug, making me feel really uncomfortable. I began to look around frantically to see if Oruki or Haruhi were watching us. Luckily they weren't. This hug wouldn't have been so bad if I knew it was just the two of us in the house, but if either of those two saw Naru-san and I right now… well you get the idea.

It was then that my cell phone began to ring, giving me an excuse to escape her embrace.

"I need to get this."

Naru-san understood and let go. "Okay! Thank you for your kind words, Kyon-kun!" She then walked away cheerfully.

Looking at my cell phone, I noticed it was Koizumi who was calling. I answered as I made my way upstairs and into my room. I was sure to speak quietly while doing so, remembering that the wall between my room and Haruhi's weren't very thick and that if I could hear her, she could hear me.

"What's up, Koizumi?"

"I sensed that a close space has recently appeared. I wanted to know if you knew why?"

Another closed space, huh? Not surprising considering what happened earlier.

"Haruhi and her father got into a fight over chores. And she mad at me because of it."

"Oh really," said Koizumi. "I figured that might be the case. To be honest, the vast majority of closed spaces that appeared when Suzumiya-san was still in junior high were caused by confrontations between herself and her father."

"They don't get along, huh?"

"Well, perhaps about as well as any girl who was acting out would with a strict parent."

For some reason, I was not surprised by any of this. It made total sense that the two of them would be like this. The problem was that the both of them were completely ignorant of the fact that every time they decide to butt heads, the world was put at risk.

"So what am I supposed to do about it?"

"Just do what you can to mitigate situations like this as they occur. These things happen, but that doesn't mean we have to let them take their natural course. I'm sure you'll think of something."

"I suppose telling Haruhi's parents the truth is off limits."

"The Organization feels that it's best that they are left in the dark. The higher ups believe that having them know would only increase the likelihood of Suzumiya-san discovering her true potential."

Figures…

"Anyway, I have to go shutdown the closed space now. I'll talk to you later."

"Later."

After turning off my phone, I couldn't help but feel like an unnecessary amount of responsibility was put on my shoulders. Keeping Haruhi happy outside of her home was already hard enough. And having to face up to Oruki whenever he feels the need to confront his daughter was certainly an easy ticket to a world of hurt. I couldn't help but rub my temples as a headache soon came. I can't wait to get out of here…

Eventually it was time for dinner. If I had remembered correctly, it was American night, which I figured would be burgers and fries night. I was surprised to find out that instead we were having fried chicken with mashed potatoes, macaroni and cheese, and creamed corn. It turned out to be a pretty damn good meal again. I couldn't help but notice that Haruhi still wouldn't look at me in the face while we were eating. Why the hell is she mad at me? It's not my fault she got into trouble.

After we cleaned up, I went to my room to do my homework, since it was starting to get late, and I knew I had to do it before it was too late.

About an hour after starting my homework I started to hear a strange noise from outside. I looked out the window, but didn't see anything. I opened it and looked around. I saw something from the corner of my eye. There was someone climbing onto the roof. When I saw that Haruhi's window was open, I figured it must have been her. I called up there just to be sure.

"Haruhi, is that you?"

I didn't get a response. She still won't talk to me. This has got to end.

"Hey, I don't get why you're mad at me. I was doing what you asked until your dad stopped me. I didn't know I was supposed to take the garbage out in secret. You didn't tell me it that I was doing something you were supposed to be doing."

I waited about half a minute for a response, but I never got one. Just when I was about to give up and close the window, Haruhi finally spoke.

"I… I know… I'm not really mad at you… I'm mad at my dad…"

I heard movement above me and a moment later I saw Haruhi's head pop up from the edge of the roof. It was funny seeing her hair dangle upside down like that.

"The truth is my dad and I haven't really been on the best of terms since I entered junior high. He's such a hard ass sometimes that it drives me nuts."

I nodded in understanding. After all, I've been getting a taste of what he was like these last two day. I don't even want to imagine what going through your whole life with him would be like.

Haruhi's eyes began to shift a bit before she spoke. "Listen, you want to come up here?"

I began to look around my window. "I don't think I can get up there from my window."

Haruhi pointed at her window. "Just go through my room and climb up from my window. The drainage pipe over there is held up against a piece of wood you can step on." She then points her finger at my nose. "Just so you know, you're only getting permission to pass through my room. You are absolutely not allowed to touch anything in there. Got it?!"

I nodded before I walked out of my room. I paused momentarily before entering Haruhi's room. I had yet to see what it looked like

and I was a little apprehensive to see it. I finally turned the knob and opened the door.

As expected, Haruhi's room exuded her personality. Her ceiling and walls had all kinds of strange symbols and shapes strewn about it in various colors. I couldn't help but notice that some of them looked like the symbols she had painted (or rather I had painted) during the Tanabata Festival almost four years ago. I noted that the paint she used was showing signs of wear, indicating that she painted her ceiling and walls quite some time ago, likely before she went into high school. The room was a bit of a mess as I saw clothes, magazines and manga strewn about the floor, dresser, night stand and bed. I tried not to pay too much attention to the bra I saw on the corner of her bed. Finally, the room was complete with a TV and computer.

After giving the room a quick look over, I couldn't help but feel relieved that the room was only this weird. It certainly was Haruhi-esque. I then made my way to the open window and began to climb out of it. The step that Haruhi mentioned was a bit small, and I'd be lying if I said that climbing up to the roof was a safe ordeal. I did manage to make it up to the top, though, so I guess it worked well enough.

Haruhi was lying on her back with her hand behind her head, looking up at the stars. The light pollution in the area dimmed them pretty badly, but some of them were still visible. I'm guessing this must be something Haruhi did whenever she wanted some solitude to think to herself. I took my spot next to her and lied down as well.

We were silent for a few minutes as we continued to watch the stars, deep in contemplation. The air had cooled considerably since earlier today, so it was actually quite comfortable. Eventually, Haruhi gained the will to speak again.

"I get this feeling sometimes that my dad wished I had been born a boy."

"Oh, really?"

"Before I went into junior high, he tried really hard to get me into all kinds of sports and stuff. He kept this up all the way until I started high school. No matter what he tried to get me into, I always found it boring. I could tell that he was frustrated not having someone to play ball with or something."

"Why didn't your parents try to have another kid if it was that important for them?"

"My mom couldn't have anymore kids after me. Something happened to her cervix or something. I think it was a tumor. Anyway, the surgery needed to remove it basically made it so that she couldn't have children anymore."

"That sucks."

"I love my dad, but it's always been hard for us to see eye to eye on some things. What bothers me is that he's such a hypocrite. He used to get into trouble a lot too when he was my age. Now he acts like we all should be perfect little angels."

"Parents usually don't want their kids to make the same mistake that they made."

"I guess so…"

Things grew silent between us again. I couldn't help but briefly contemplate the idea of the male version of Haruhi. The thought scared me a bit, so I tried to come up with something to change the subject.

"Do you mind if I ask you a hypothetical question?"

Haruhi turned towards me when she heard the question. "Like what?"

"Let's just say, hypothetically mind you, that you have the power to alter reality to your very whim. You're basically omnipotent. What is the first thing you would do if that were the case?"

Haruhi sat up and gave the question some thought. "The first thing I would do…" she then smiled brightly before finishing her answer. "Is meet up with some aliens, time-travelers and espers and have fun with them, of course!"

Upon hearing this answer, I couldn't help but mentally face palm. She was completely ignorant of the fact that she was doing this very thing already everyday for almost a year. Haruhi then asked me the same question.

"What would you do if you were omnipotent?"

"I'd give my power to someone else, or not use it altogether. Such a power would be a bother. I'd be afraid of ruining everything."

Haruhi's face showed obvious amounts of annoyance upon hearing my answer. "What kind of boring answer it that?! You'd throw away the one chance you'd get unlock any mystery you could think of?! You could explore the deepest oceans, or the farthest reaches of space! You wouldn't even have to mess things up to do that! Are you telling me you wouldn't do any of that?!"

"Well, if you put it that way…"

I guess she's right. I would probably like to travel around in space for a while in order to see what I could find. Although I'd probably get bored of this after a while and if there is anything I've learned in the last year is that bad things happen when omnipotent beings become bored.

To change the subject, I decided to ask another hypothetical. "Okay, how about this? Say you were stranded on a desert island with nothing but what's already on the island to survive or escape. Who would you want to have there with you?"

Haruhi went and lied back down and began to think about the question. "That's a tough one… As fun as it would be to have Mikuru-chan there, she wouldn't be very helpful. Koizumi would be okay, I guess. Yuki would definitely be the most useful. You on the other hand would only be good for menial labor, and even then…"

Thanks. I appreciate that…

"I guess I'd go with Yuki. What about you?"

"Well, you'd be the last person I'd want to be stuck with," I said with a bit of sarcasm in my voice. Haruhi reciprocated by punching me in the arm. "Ow! See? That's why!"

"Very funny!" said Haruhi before she jumped on me and put me in a head lock. "Tell me who would you want to be with? Is it Mikuru? Or maybe Yuki? Or is it Koizumi? Do you even swing that way?"

No I do not, and whoever said that physical attraction was the only thing I'd take into account when it comes to picking someone?

"Tell me then! Who?"

I was really beginning to regret the question. I wasn't sure how to answer it. Being alone with Asahina-san would be great in the short term, but a nightmare long term. Koizumi would drive me nuts with his long winded expositions. Nagato would be useful but boring. And who ever said it had to be member of the SOS Brigade? Maybe I would pick Tsuruya-san.

"Hurry up and pick one!"

"Fine! I'd pick Tsuruya-san!"

I felt Haruhi pause for a moment after I said that.

"Why'd you pick her? Do you like her or something?"

"No. I just figured she had the fewest down sides."

Haruhi finally let me go and gave me a strange look.

"What kind of stupid reason is that? I swear, sometimes I just don't understand how you think, Kyon."

That's funny. Now you know how I've felt about you since I first met you.

Haruhi lied back down and started looking at the sky. I got the feeling that maybe now was a good time to go back to my room.

"I'm going to go back to my room. I'm getting tired…"

"Okay…"

As I moved carefully back towards Haruhi's window, I looked back at her one last time. I had to admit, seeing her face under the light of the moon made her look absolutely stunning. It was hard to tell, but I think she might have looked disappointed. Was she upset that I didn't pick her? Whatever…

I made it back to my room without falling and finished my homework before I finally went to bed. Today had been another exhausting day, and I didn't know how much longer I could keep this up.

I was having a bout of restlessness at first, but eventually I could feel myself starting to doze off when I heard the door to my room open. I turned quickly to see what it was. I was surprised to see that it was Nara-san. She walked towards me like a zombie. She eventually got to the edge of my bed and stood there motionless for about a minute.

To be honest, I was totally freaking out at this point. I had no idea what the hell she was doing. Was she possessed or something? Maybe those wards finally started working… nah, that's not it. She's probably just sleep walking. So why am I still scared as hell?

It was then that she lied right next to me. I stayed motionless as I tried to figure out what to do. My bed wasn't very big, and I was feeling very cramped and uncomfortable. Unfortunately, before I could do anything else, Naru-san rolled over and wrapped her arms around me. Okay, now I was really, really uncomfortable. It wasn't that the feeling of Naru-san body against mine was a bad thing. Far from it. It's just the fact that I'm smart enough to know that this could only end badly for me if I didn't do something.

"Mmm… Oruki-kun…"

Great, she thinks I'm her husband. Wonderful… okay, think. What should I do? I guess I could just wake her up. No! Think harder! If I woke her up while in this position, she might misunderstand and scream. That would lead to Haruhi and her father waking up, coming in here and also misinterpreting what's going on. Seconds later the two of them would rip me into little pieces. No, the only thing I can do is try and escape her grip and get out of the bed.

Fortunately, Naru-san wasn't nearly as strong as her daughter or husband, so I was able to slowly wriggle out of her grip and slip out of the bed without waking her up. After breathing a huge sigh of relief, I slowly crept my way out of my room and down the stairs. I decided to lie down on the couch for the night. It wasn't as comfortable as my bed, but the alternative was far worse.

I closed my eyes and started to dose off before I heard something again. Upon opening my eyes, I was horrified to see Naru-san standing over me again. No! Not again! Before I could react, Naru-san fell on top of me and wrapped her arms around me once again.

"Why'd you go, Oruki-kun…"

This was really bad! She was on top of me this time, and I couldn't slip out without pushing her off, which would likely wake her up. I tried to remove her hands, but they gripped tighter as a reflex action, making it next to impossible to get away. In my struggle to her off me, we both fell off the couch. My back landed on floor with a loud

thud which was quite painful. She still didn't let go of me. I was trapped, and I couldn't get away… oh no! NO! They heard the noise! I could hear the both of them rushing down the stairs! There's only one thing I could do! Exclaim my innocents and hope for mercy!

"I SWEAR TO GOD IT'S NOT WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE!!!"

I could see the faces of both Haruhi and her father staring blankly at myself and Naru-san while we were in our odd position. I thought for a moment that I saw my life flash before my eyes. It was after a few seconds that I saw Haruhi sigh deeply before she walked toward the two of us. I winced just as she came up to me, expecting tremendous pain to come my way, but instead she pressed her foot on her mother's back and began to nudge her.

"Mom! Wake up! You're sleep walking again!"

It was moments later that Naru-san began to wake. After a few seconds of disorientation, she finally got up, realizing where she was.

"Oh my. What happened?"

I moved away from her when she finally got off of me. I then explained what had happened and why we were in the living room. Naru-san gave an embarrassed smile before apologizing.

"I'm sorry… I'm afraid I've always had a sleep walking problem. I hope I didn't scare you."

Oh you scared me alright. I hope that never happens again. Eventually, everyone decided to head back to bed. I did however note that Oruki gave me another look of suspicion as we went upstairs. He hates me. He really, really, really, really, really hates me.

I can't wait to get out of here…

Chapter 7

I'm loving the support this story is getting, and I still can't believe that this story is doing so well. I haven't even gotten to the best parts yet ^_^'

Anyway, I'd like to respond to Anonymous482000's question about changing this story to a Kyon X Naru fic. Not going to happen… Kyon would be murdered by Oruki, and I would be murder by the Kyon X Haruhi shippers. And since I'm one of those shippers, I'd have to kill myself. It is flattering to know that you like the character enough to want her to be paired with Kyon though! ^_^

I wasn't expecting this chapter to be that long, but instead it turned into the longest one yet. Dammit! I just keep wanting to cram so much stuff into every chapter. Oh well… hope you enjoy it anyway!

Chapter 7

I can't believe it's Saturday already. I honestly didn't think I'd make it this far. Everyday has had its own new set of trials I had to overcome, and although I was able to triumph over them in the end, I'd be lying if I said that I was adjusting to my new surroundings. To be honest, I was actually starting to loose it a bit. I was still able to keep my cool, but internally I was pulling my hair out.

The chores I had to do the last three days definitely were less than fun. First, I had to help Naru-san with her garden. It wasn't a terribly large garden, but it definitely was the kind of garden only the Suzumiyas would want to keep. There were none of the usual plants you'd find in a typical garden. This was not a vegetable garden, or a flower garden. No, this was a carnivorous plant garden. Every plant in it survived by devouring bugs in some way. There were several

pitcher plants, plants that caught prey with sticky goo, and of course the famous Venus Fly Trap. To be honest, I actually thought it would be bigger, but the Venus Fly Trap is actually pretty small. I found the pitcher plants to be the most disturbing, seeing all the dead bugs floating inside them. I even saw one of those Japanese Giant Hornets inside one. Those things freak the hell out of me. Wouldn't want to be stung by one of those. Although Naru-san told me that her choice of garden was definitely motivated by trying something different, she was glad to find that it had the added benefit of reducing the amount of bugs they had to deal with around the house. She was actually quite proud of it.

There were of course other chores as well, such as cleaning out the basement. There I discovered that Oruki had an interesting hobby that he liked to work on while Haruhi was at school… wood working. Oruki apparently got very bored during the early part of the day, and he needed something to help expend all the extra energy he had. I was amazed a man at his age could be so restless, but nevertheless that pent up energy was there, and it needed an outlet. Oruki made all kinds of things, from dressers and chairs, to whittling animal figures or some other weird folk art. It didn't matter to Oruki, as long as it was wood. He would eventually put some of his stuff for sale to some small retailers that thought they could make money on his stuff. Anything he couldn't sell usually got stored in the basement… and there was a lot of stuff down there…

Oruki finally decided to get rid of most of it, since it was taking up too much room for him to continue working, and it was my job to remove all that was going out the door. To no surprise, Oruki refused to help me with any of it and made me do all the work, which really sucked since some of the furniture he made was pretty heavy. This of course did nothing to prevent Oruki from reminding me that I needed to work faster. It was really starting to piss me off.

I remembered noticing a turtle that Oruki had carved. It was pretty cute looking, and Oruki had even gone through the effort of putting

black marbles in for its eyes. Oruki was going to throw it away, so I asked him if I could keep it.

"Sure, why not. You two have a lot in common anyway. You're both slow!"

After taking another insult to my work ethic, I put the turtle to the side, remembering to bring it to my room when I was done. I couldn't help but notice that Oruki was a little less callous towards me afterwards, even allowing me to have a break. Was he happy over the fact that I liked a piece of his work? Perhaps he does have a shred of humanity…

It took me nearly all day to remove the furniture, wood sculptures, scrap and wood chips from the basement. I had to admit that when I was done, the place looked quite professional. Oruki never did thank me for a job well done though. I guess I that would be too much to expect from a Suzumiya. Well, that's not fair. Naru-san is nice enough to thank me and has done so before, so she's an exception I guess.

Weirdness be damned, Naru-san was the one thing keeping me going. To be honest, I'm starting to find her quirks rather charming. If Haruhi were half as sweet as she was, I would have definitely asked her o… never mind that thought. I think the stress is getting to me.

Speaking of Haruhi, of course she herself had stuff for me to do as well, although she didn't ask that I do them until after her father was gone to go to work. Pretty much any chore she was supposed to do was now my responsibility. If I made any protest, she would guilt trip me by reminding me of all the favors she did for me during the last week. She even made me clean her room while watching me like a hawk to ensure I didn't see or touch anything that was off limits. I had hoped that I would find something incriminating during my cleaning, but Haruhi was sure to prevent that. Her computer was especially off-limits. Hmm… I might have to sneak in to her room and check it out one of these days. It would be nice if I could extort something out of Haruhi for a change, just to give her a taste of her own medicine.

If there was a positive to the last three days, it was that dinner was great every time. It seemed that there was nothing that Naru-san could not cook. Wednesday, which was Hispanic day, we had burritos with Spanish rice. Thursday, Italian day, we had ravioli stuff with some kind of cheese. Finally, last night, we had a South African dish known as "Bobotie", which was some kind of meat dish that had curry, spices and dried fruit. I had to admit that before I moved here that my understanding of food was quite limited. I think I might have to try and be more open-minded to other cultures in the future.

Anyway, now it was Saturday morning, and I was still sleeping. The night before, I was looking forward to being able to finally sleep in, since the Brigade wasn't meeting today so Haruhi could "help" me while I looked at apartments. I should have known better.

SPLASH!

Oh my god that was cold! I bolted out of my sleep the moment I felt my skin scream in agony from the ice cold water hitting me… water? What the hell?

I looked to my left to find a prideful and mischievous smile on the one and only Haruhi, who was holding a bucket.

"That worked really good!"

To be honest, Haruhi had been experimenting to try and find the best way to wake me up in the morning. My sister had never had the sophistication of doing anything more that beat the crap out of me until I was awake. Haruhi on the other hand had been refining her technique, trying to find a method that was effective at waking me up without the need to exert too much effort. On Wednesday, she tried grabbing me by my hair and bouncing my head up and down until I woke. Thursday, she tried to tickle me awake with a feather, which failed miserably, causing her to lose patience and beat the crap out of me again. Finally, yesterday morning she used an air horn, which worked great and hurt like hell, but her parents were also woken up and she got an ear full from her father shortly afterwards.

From her perspective, today was probably the most effective experiment yet.

"I guess I'll have to use this method from now on."

"What's wrong with you?! You got both me and my bed completely soaked!"

"Oh quit being a baby, Kyon. It's only water."

"And how exactly do you expect me to dry out all of the sheets and my bed?"

"Not my problem…"

Of course, typical Haruhi.

"And why are you waking me up so damn early? It's not a school day."

"I refuse to let you sleep your life away, that's why! Haven't you heard of the term Carpe Diem?"

"Carpe Diem? Yeah, I've heard of it. It's Latin for seize the day, right."

"Exactly! I cannot let you waste your life away sleeping when it's a beautiful day outside! We should be out there making the most out of the day!"

I finally gained the urge to step out of bed, water starting to drip from my soaked clothes.

"You do realize that we're supposed to looking at apartments today, right?!"

"Duh, I know that. I'm not stupid, Kyon."

Brass, inconsiderate, loud, obnoxious? Definitely. Stupid? No. Although sometimes I think her intellect can be selective.

"I'm going to wash up now. Do you mind?"

Haruhi turned around and walked out the door. "Just don't take all day."

Of course. Wouldn't want my master to wait on me…

After Haruhi and I had finished our breakfast, we went out to take a look at the first apartment on the list. It was in a more run down part of town, and I had to admit that I wasn't terribly comfortable walking around in this part of town. I kept my eye on Haruhi, but she seemed completely unconcerned about where we were. Now that I think about it, if anything were to happen, she'd probably be able to take care of herself better than I could.

The apartment we first went to was perhaps more run down than the neighborhood. The carpet was old and stained, the rooms were tiny and cramped, and the place had a horrible stink to it. It was cheap though, and a roof over my head, so I could only complain so much.

Haruhi on the other hand… "There's no way you can live in a place like this! I wouldn't allow a dog to live in here!"

I opened the cabinets to inspect them. I saw a couple cockroaches crawling inside and I noted the rats droppings as well. I then turned on the water in the bathroom. The water was a delicious brown color.

"Okay, this place is definitely got a lot of problems, but what can you expect for forty-thousand yen a month? Personally, I'm fine with it was long as the roof on my head doesn't collapse."

I then leaned on the wall with my hand. It was only moments later that the dry wall itself collapsed from the weight of my hand, allowing a hole the size of my hand to break though. When I pulled my hand out, I spotted a couple roaches crawling out of the hole I created. I turned to Haruhi, who had a look on her face that said "I told you so."

"Okay, you win. We're out of here…"

So the two of us moved onto the second apartment on the list. It wasn't too far from the first one, but the apartment itself was considerably nicer than the last one. It was more than spacious enough for one person. In fact, it was good enough for two people if they shared a bed. It came with its own refrigerator and stove, and best of all the water was clean.

I turned to the apartment manager, a short, nerdy looking middle aged man, and asked him a question. "Only forty thousand yen a month, huh?"

"Yep"

I was definitely tempted. This seemed like an unbelievable deal, but before I could decide, Haruhi grabbed my arm and pulled me to the other room.

"You can't move in here."

"Why the hell not? It's perfect!"

"I got a bad feeling about this place. Why would such a nice apartment come so cheap? The manager of this place must be hiding something."

I'm starting to get the feeling that Haruhi was just trying to find any excuse she could to keep me from moving out. "Like what?"

"Maybe there was a murder that happened here, or maybe the manager is a serial killer who's trying to lure in fresh victims!"

"You're being paranoid."

Before Haruhi could respond, the manager walked into the room.

"By the way, if you're both are moving in, I'll need you both to sign the lease agreement."

I guess I could see why he would misunderstand. I looked at Haruhi briefly. I could see a light blush on her face. The thought of the two of us living together alone… yeah right, like that would ever happen.

"She's not moving in…"

Before the manager could say anything, Haruhi approached him while pointing an accusing finger at him. "So tell us the truth, why is the rent so cheap here?"

The manager started to look a little nervous. "N… no reason…"

Haruhi narrowed her eyes as she leaned towards him in an intimating manner. "You're lying! What are you hiding?"

The manager pulled on his collar nervously while swallowing hard. "Well, there is a tiny little reason why the rent is cheap."

"Spit it out!" commanded Haruhi. I had to admit she certainly knew how to get people to talk. She could definitely be a detective or a police interrogator.

Before the manager could say anything, a small rumble could be heard from the distance. Soon, the rumble became louder and louder until it was right next to the apartment, causing the whole place to shake. Looking out the window, I noticed that a train was speeding by right next to our window. It was incredibly nosy and disturbing.

The manager scratched the back of his head nervously. "Well, there is a bit of a problem with the train… It only comes by once in a while though…"

With that I heard another train come the other way, making a huge noise and rattling the apartment once again. Haruhi turned to me immediately afterwards and spoke.

"You can't live here!"

"Why the hell not?"

"How can you possibly expect to live comfortably with all that racket? Even you couldn't sleep through all that! You need to be rested for both school and Brigade activities!"

I sighed deeply and nodded my head. I told the manager that place wasn't what we were looking for. He was disappointed but understood. We soon left and went to the last apartment on the list. Things weren't looking good…

The last apartment on the list was at a building that was familiar. It took me a minute, but I realized that it was the same apartment building that the Computer Club President lived at. This relieved me slightly since I had already been inside his apartment once when the SOS Brigade investigated his sudden disappearance for his "girlfriend" Emiri Kimidori. I was also reminded of the giant camel cricket that Koizumi and Nagato defeated. Good times…

The manager showed us what the studio apartment looked like inside, and it was no surprise that it was very similar to the one the President of the Computer Club had. It wasn't wonderful or anything, but it was definitely not shabby. Definitely enough for a guy like me to handle, it was also within my price range as well, which is always a bonus.

I couldn't help but notice again that Haruhi was less than satisfied with the place. What a surprise.

"This won't work either, Kyon."

"Why the hell not?"

It could see on her face that she was struggling to find a reason. "It's… it's too small…"

Is that the best you could do? Why don't you just come out and say that you don't want me to move out? I knew that bringing you along

was just going to make things harder.

"It's fine, Haruhi. This place is more than enough to meet my needs." I then turn towards the manager. "I'll take it."

The manager smiled and nodded. "Good, I'll meet you at my office and we'll take care of everything." He then left the apartment.

I turned to Haruhi before getting ready to go to the office. I could see that her face looked incredibly disappointed. Was she that lonely at home that she wanted me to stay? Whatever…

We headed back downstairs to the office. The manager got all the paperwork ready and handed it to me along with a pen.

"Just fill all this information out, and give me your first and last months rent and we'll be good to go."

I blinked in confusion for a moment when he said that. "Wait, what do you mean first and last months rent?"

"You have to pay for two months rent in advance before you can move in. That's our policy."

My eyes widened in horror. "Are you kidding me? I only have enough for one month's rent."

The manager sighed in disappointment. "That's too bad, but rules are rules. We have that policy implemented to prevent people who miss a month of rent from being evicted without still owing a month of rent. We can't make exceptions."

I hung my head in defeat. I guess I was naïve when it came to renting apartments. I had no idea that such a policy existed. I apologized to the manager and left with Haruhi. I noticed a look of relief on her face as we left.

So in the end, our search for places to live ended in glorious failure. The sun was starting to get hot, and I was starting to get hungry.

Haruhi apparently read my mind, because she too brought up the idea of finding something to eat.

"I can't spend any of my money, Haruhi. I need to hold on to whatever I have in order to find a place to live eventually."

Haruhi made a visible frown when I said this. "That sucks… I didn't bring my money with me, either."

Fortune seemed to smile on us though, since only moments later, we ran into both Tsuruya-san and Asahina-san.

"Hey you guys! Fancy meeting you here, nyoro~"

The two of them ran up to greet us.

"Hi Kyon-kun, Suzumiya-san," said Asahina-san politely. "How are you doing?"

"We were looking at some apartments for me to move in. It was a failure, though. What are you two up to?"

"Oh, Mikuru-chan and I were doing some window shopping." Tsuruya-san then became sudden excited. "That reminds me! Mikuru-chan told me that you moved in with Haruhi-nyan! I can't believe it, nyoro~!"

I scratched the back of my head after she said this. "Yeah, I did…"

"You have to totally tell me what that's like! I wonder what her parents are like! We should get together somewhere and eat while you tell me! My treat!"

I was thankful of Tsuruya-san's generosity as the four of us started heading to a good place to eat. If you were wondering as to why Haruhi was so quiet, it was because she kept staring at Tsuruya-san and myself suspiciously the whole time. Was she thinking about my answer to that stupid hypothetical question she asked me the other night? I really wished I hadn't asked her that question first.

We did eventually find a bistro to eat at, so we gathered at our table and made our orders. Now on the surface, you might think that having a meal with three beautiful women at the same time would a dream come true, but in reality, it's a guy's nightmare. The three of them started talking about a wide array of topics that only girls would want to talk about. There were boring topics, like fashion and diets, and then there were topics that were really awkward for a guy to listen to, such as menstrual periods and shaving their legs. It was times like this that made me wish Koizumi was here. I least I could converse with him about something I could relate to.

"So like, I'm getting sick of having to shave my legs all the time, and I don't want to wax them cause that would be like megas painful. So I wanted to try that stuff they put out that I heard removes hair without having to pull it out!"

"Oh, I don't think I could try that," said Asahina-san. "It sounds like it could be dangerous."

God, this conversation makes me want to pull my hair out! I mean, the thought of both Asahina-san and Tsuruya-san shaving their legs wasn't an unpleasant image by any stretch of the imagination, but for some reason it made me really uncomfortable. These are the kinds of thoughts you'd rather have when you're alone or hanging out with some guy buddies while girl watching, but not when you're right next to the girls you're fantasizing about. This was made worse by the fact that the image of Haruhi shaving her legs also kept popping into my head, since I was reminded of the yellow colored razor she had for that very purpose. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't keep that stupid image out of my head. I couldn't wait to finish my food and get out of there.

"Hey Haruhi-nyan! You shave your legs too, right?"

Dammit! There it is again! Thank you so much Tsuruya-san!

Haruhi paused for a moment before nodding.

"You do?! I'm surprised that you even go through the trouble. I thought you weren't looking for a guy."

"I never said that," said Haruhi. "I'm just trying to find someone who meets my standards."

It was at this point that I finally felt the need to interject for the first time since we entered the restaurant. "What, you mean like an Alien, Time-Traveler and Esper? You're still hoping for that, huh?"

Haruhi crossed her arms and looked away. "Maybe I am."

"What if they preferred a girl who didn't shave their legs? What would you do then?"

Haruhi appeared stumped momentarily by my question. She became visibly frustrated before she finally answered. "I just know that they would, okay?"

Tsuruya-san moved closer Haruhi and put her hands on her shoulders. "Maybe she shaves because she already has a guys she's after, nyoro~!"

"I do not!" yelled Haruhi with a very visible blush on her face.

I could see that this point that Asahina-san was becoming visibly nervous that Tsuruya-san teasing might upset Haruhi. "Um, Tsuruya-san…"

Tsuruya-san then wrapped her arms around Haruhi and hugged her tightly. "Come on! Tell us who it is! We won't tell!"

It was at this point that I decided to go to the bathroom, for no other reason other than the fact that I really didn't want to know who Haruhi wanted. "I'll leave you girls be for a bit. I'll be right back."

"You don't have to go anywhere, Kyon! I'm not telling them anything!" She then pushed Tsuruya-san off of her.

Tsuruya-san pouted after being pushed off. "You're not going to tell us? You're no fun, Haruhi-nyan." She then put on a bright smile again, allowing that cute fang of hers to be seen. "That's okay, I'm pretty sure I know who it is anyway."

Who? Wait, never mind. I don't want to know. It's information that would only complicate my life. Some things are just best left unknown.

The four of us soon received our food and began to chow down; all remnants of the conversation forgotten… still have that stupid image of Haruhi shaving her legs in my mind. Think about Asahina-san… think about Asahina-san…

Eventually, we finished eating and we went our separate ways. I looked at the watch that Koizumi gave to me about a week ago and found that it was two o'clock. As Haruhi and I started walking toward home, Haruhi had a bizarre request… well it was more of a command really.

"Kyon, carry me."

I gave her a strange look when told me to do this. "What? Why?"

"I'm hot and my feet are getting tired. No more questions! Do as your Brigade Chief commands! Any and all objections will be seen as an act of treason!"

I facepalmed for a second, realizing how unreasonable she was being. I was hot, too, and carrying her would only make me hotter. Unfortunately, I knew that I was going to do it anyway, since I knew she was going to guilt trip me into it, and if that didn't work, she would use threats and punishments next. Sometimes it just wasn't worth the effort to fight with Haruhi.

"Fine, whatever… climb on my back."

I started carrying Haruhi as I made my way back to her house, which was definitely not fun in any way. Granted, Haruhi wasn't a heavy girl. I figured she must have been some where between 40 to 45 kilograms, but even this amount of weight would become very heavy eventually, especially when walking uphill.

Haruhi had her head on my shoulder and her arms around my chest. She was surprisingly quiet. I started getting the feeling that maybe she was feeling melancholic. I really couldn't figure out why she would be though. Was it about what Tsuruya-san said when we were at the restaurant? Or maybe it was something else. You can never be terribly sure with Haruhi. Her mood can change on a whim and her reasons were always a mystery.

I managed to walk about a kilometer and a half before I could feel myself becoming exhausted carrying her. I reluctantly stopped and told her this.

"I'm spent. I have to put you down…"

"Already? Dammit, Kyon! Can't you do anything right? To think you could only go this far before stopping. It's pathetic!"

I was really getting annoyed. The truth be told, the stress of the entire week before combined with my frustration that I couldn't find a place to stay was really getting to me, so the fact that Haruhi was down my throat was really starting to irk me.

"I don't know what your problem is, but if you think you can just go can step all over me just because you're in a bad mood, I'm not going to stand for it! I'm already taking enough crap from your dad, and the fact that my search for apartments failed had only made things worse. Not to mention that you were really rude to Tsuruya-san earlier. What did she do to you?"

Haruhi turned her head away from me and grunted in annoyance. "Of course you come to her defense. She's your favorite, right?"

"What are you talking about? You're not still hung up over that stupid question we asked each other the other night, are you? Would you have been happier if I'd picked you instead?"

Haruhi was quiet after I asked the question, which started making me confused. "You're jealous, aren't you?"

"I am not!" she screamed. She then started walking faster as if she was trying to get away from me. "I'm done talking!"

I rolled my eyes and let her get ahead of me, since I was also sick of arguing with her. After about ten minutes, she'd developed quite a lead ahead of me. It was large enough that when I received a call on my cell phone, she couldn't hear it. I quickly checked my phone to see who it was. To my surprise, it was Tsuruya-san. I sighed a bit before answering it.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Kyon! What's up?"

I hate it when people call someone and asked them pointless questions like this, especially when they have an actual reason for calling. Just get to the point, dammit!

"Not much…"

"Hey, I wanted to ask, like, what was up with Haruhi-nyan? She seemed really mad at something. Was she mad at me?"

I sighed deeply before answering her. "Don't worry. Haruhi just being an idiot. You didn't do anything."

"Okay, I just wanted to know."

It was then that I remembered something. "Oh, by the way. Since I'm not moving away and all, do you want that coat and stuff you gave me at the party back?"

"Huh? Oh, don't worry about that. Let's just call it an early birthday present. Oh, and I never did get a chance to find out about Haruhi-nyan's parents. Oh well, we'll talk about that some other time. Anyway, talk to ya laters."

I sighed deeply as I hung up the phone. This day was really starting to suck badly. I'm sure I'll have to deal with Haruhi eventually. It's times like this that I wished I still lived at my old place. My life was so much easier then.

Haruhi made it back to her place before me, so it would come as no surprise that when she barges inside that her parents would notice her bad mood. I was almost certain that I would be to blame. When I came to the front door of their home, I seriously contemplated not going in. I half expected Oruki to charge up to me and pound me into a pulp. At the same time, I knew that the longer it took for me to enter the house, the worse it would look for me. I put my hand on the doorknob and slowly turned it, expecting the worst.

When I opened the door, I was surprised to find that no one was waiting for me at the door. Maybe they didn't notice Haruhi in a bad mood. Maybe if I'm lucky I can sneak into my room and avoid all of them.

I overestimated my luck. Just as I was trying to reach the stairs, I heard a voice from the living room call out to me. "Kyon-kun! Come here!"

God dammit…

I walked into the living room to find Oruki sitting on the couch watching TV. He never bothered to look me in the eyes before he spoke.

"I noticed Haruhi-chan looked upset when she came home. Know anything about that?"

I could feel myself getting sick to my stomach. I knew this was going to end badly. I knew that only thing I could do was tell the truth and hope that the ensuing pain that came my way wasn't too excruciating.

"I honestly wish I knew. She's been moody all day, especially when we were eating lunch with some friends of ours. She's mad at this one girl for reasons beyond me, and I think she mad at me, too. I can't for the life of me figure out why…"

Oruki turned his head away from the television and looked at me directly. "Oh really?"

"Yeah," I said before swallowing hard. "Don't take this the wrong way, but sometimes your daughter confuses the hell out of me."

He turned his head away from me and stared at the TV again. His expression slowly changed and contorted. Strangely though, it was not an expression of anger but… laughter? He started chuckling lightly before eventually starting laughing hysterically. After a minute, Oruki coughed a bit when he was finished laughing.

"Ain't that the truth? Women…"

I stood there dumbfounded. Only a couple minutes ago I thought I was going to die, but instead it seems that I'm going to be spared. Am I off the hook? Or maybe he just thinks that Haruhi was going to give me enough hell later. More than ever I'm starting to really find the Suzumiyas a confusing bunch of people.

It was then that Oruki turned to me again. "Do you watch baseball?"

This question seemed a bit out of the blue. Do I like baseball? To be honest, I would consider myself to be a casual fan of the sport. I don't watch it religiously, only when there wasn't really anything better on TV.

Oruki pointed to an empty spot on the couch. "Take a seat. The game's about to start."

Did I hear him right? Did he just ask me to watch baseball with him? Actually it was more like I was being ordered to watch it with him, but still. I think I'm losing my mind.

I reluctantly took my seat and began to watch the game. I was reminded by all the baseball paraphernalia in the living room that Oruki was obviously a huge fan of the sport. And looking at the team name that all the paraphernalia had pasted on them, I knew which team I was supposed to be rooting for.

The team Oruki was a fan of, whose caps bore the color red, was going up against a team that bore green color caps. The red team was up at bat first. I watched curiously as Oruki was at the edge of his seat whenever the pitcher was about the throw the ball. It was as if the tension of not knowing the outcome of every pitch, every swing, was the sweetest, most savory feeling life could offer. Personally, I thought he was nuts.

The first inning ended with the red team scoring nothing. Two batters were struck out; two were on base but never made it home; and the fifth batter hit the ball right into the outfielder's waiting glove. It was now the green team's chance to score. They were more successful, scoring two runs before the inning ended.

Now it was quite obvious where all the energy in the room was focused, and it wasn't me. I was lazily sitting back with my head resting on my hand. I wasn't completely bored, but I didn't have the enthusiasm of Oruki. This was something that was bothering him quite a bit, and by the time we got to the third inning, he finally decided to call me out on my lack of spirit.

"Dammit, Kyon! Just look at you! How can you possibly expect our team to win when you just sit there acting like none of this matters?! Sit up and show some god damn spirit! Don't you realize that the key

to victory for any team is for the fans to channel their energy to the players?"

That doesn't make any sense. How the hell can you make that kind of argument? We're not even at the stadium. How does our energy channel to the players?

"That's not the point!"

Then what is? You're confusing the hell out of me.

"I demand that you sit up and start participating, if you know what's good for you!"

Knowing that I didn't have a choice in the matter, I slowly sat up and feigned enthusiasm while watching the rest of the game. To be honest, it was actually a pretty intense game, as the score went back and forth several times during the course of the game. Naru-san was also kind enough to give the two of us drinks while we enjoyed the game. She never stayed to watch the game with us, though. I guess she's not a big fan of baseball.

Eventually, the game ended with the red team narrowly defeating the green team with a score of 8 to 7. I was glad that our team had pulled through despite being behind in the beginning, however Oruki seem less pleased with how the game ended.

"It wouldn't have been so close if a certain someone hadn't been faking his enthusiasm."

Even if I could believe that my enthusiasm could affect the outcome of a game, I can't help the fact that I'm not hyper and over the edge like you are. It's like blaming a snail for being slow.

"Whatever," said Oruki before sighing and sitting back into the couch. I got the feeling that the game had actually exhausted him emotionally. I found it bizarre that people could put so much of

themselves into a game. "Oh yeah. How'd your search for apartments go?"

I paused momentarily before I answered. I was somewhat surprised that he cared, but then I thought he probably wants me out of the house as soon as possible. Too bad. "Not so good. The one place that was decent was out of my price range. I didn't know that I needed two months worth of rent up front to be able to move in."

"Have you looked into becoming a roommate?" asked Oruki. "It would probably be cheaper, and you'd probably be able to move in on only one months rent."

I hadn't thought about that. "Oh, thanks. Where's the paper?"

After Oruki handed me his paper, I took the classifieds and ran up stairs to my room. I was please to find that most of the water from earlier had dried out and my bed wasn't soaked anymore. I began to once again search the classifieds, only this time I looked for anyone who was looking for a roommate. There were plenty of people asking for a roommate, but most of them were either asking for too much money or were too far away.

I had managed to find two possible places to look at when I started to hear voices again coming from Haruhi's room. She's talking to herself, again? I figured she would've been more careful about that after I embarrassed her earlier this week. Maybe she doesn't know I'm in my room.

My curiosity got the better of me, and so I moved closer to the wall adjacent to her room. I put my ear to the wall and tried to make out what she was saying.

"… shut up, Kyon…"

Is she pretending she's talking to me?

"… I'm not jealous of her!"

Sure you're not.

"… okay, I know I was being a jerk… I'm sorry…"

What? Did she just pretend to apologize to me? Is Haruhi even capable of apologizing?

"… Yes, I did apologize. Stop making fun of me about it!"

Does she think I would tease her if she apologized? Actually, now that I think about it, I probably would.

"… That it! I'm never apologizing to you again, Kyon! And you're getting a penalty for your treasonous behavior towards your Chief!"

Is this the reason why she never apologizes to me? She must think that apologizing would make her look weak and make others lose respect for her. Personally, I think that's a load of crap, but for someone who's not used to apologizing, this is probably something that they think would happen if they ever did. One thing was clear though. She was actually sorry for how she acted earlier. I was finding this moment incredibly insightful. For the first time, I was seeing a bit into how the mind of Haruhi worked without her telling me. True, I had to do it by rudely eavesdropping, but what she doesn't know won't hurt her, right?

I finally decided that I'd heard enough and I went back to looking for places that I could become a roommate. I had managed to find two more places before I heard from Naru-san that it was time for dinner.

It was European night, and the menu was a roast beef, roast potatoes, and Yorkshire pudding. I was beginning to wonder why it was called a pudding when it looked nothing like any pudding I've seen before. Eating it was more like eating a bun as well. Anyway, it was another really good meal, so I've got no complaints. Haruhi was quiet and wasn't able to look me in the face. If I hadn't heard what she had said earlier, I'd probably still think she was mad at me. I need to talk to her when I get the chance.

That chance came after dinner was finished and Haruhi and I were forced to clean the table and the dishes. Haruhi was still quiet while we were doing this, and I was starting to realize that she probably wasn't going to be the first one to say anything. Maybe she thinks I'm upset at her. I really wasn't, though, since I knew Haruhi did feel bad about what happened earlier. I had to make her aware that I wasn't still mad at her, so I thought for a minute on what to say. It hit me eventually, so I finally spoke.

"By the way, thank you for helping out earlier today."

Haruhi's eyes widened a bit, obviously not expecting the compliment out of nowhere. Her eyes turned towards me, so I gave her a light smile. She turned her eyes back to the dish she was cleaning. I noticed a light blush on her face.

After about a minute, I noticed she was trying to say something, but was obviously struggling to find the words.

"I… I… just want you to know… uh… that I wasn't really mad at you… If I made you mad…"

She was silent for quite a while. I was starting to think that she wasn't going to say anything else, but I was in for quite a surprise.

"I'msorry"

She said it so fast and so low that I almost missed it. She looked away from me, expecting me to take advantage of her sudden vulnerability, but I knew better. Nevertheless, I was still in shock. She actually said it. Haruhi Suzumiya actually apologized. This was a miracle. I know for a fact that a mere six months ago Haruhi would have never apologized for anything. Before that, she'd probably never think there was anything to apologize for.

To think she'd come this far in a year was really something, and I suddenly realized that I should probably say something before too long.

"Apology accepted, Haruhi."

Her eyes widened again. During her conversation with herself, she must have convinced herself that I was going to make fun of her for apologizing. And the fact that I didn't caught her even more off guard. She was probably a bit bewildered. Her blush had grown another shade redder, too. It was incredibly cute, and even I couldn't deny it.

However, after about a minute, she seemed to regain her senses, and she became much brighter and cheerier. She wasn't talking to me quite yet, but I could notice a definite increase in energy as she finished the dishes.

I finally finished and went back to my room. I was no longer in the mood to look through the paper, so instead I started looking through my boxes for something to occupy me. The first thing I found was a Thermos which still had Asahina-san's tea. It'd been in there for a week now and I'd forgotten all about it. I opened and smelled it. It still smelled fine, even though I knew it would be cold. I decided to drink it anyway, if only to satisfy my guilt for not drinking it sooner. And you know what? It was still pretty damn good. Damn that Asahina-san could brew a great cup of tea. I found the bag of tea leaves afterwards, making sure to remind myself to try and brew them later… or maybe I should try and have Asahina-san brew it instead…

Putting the bag aside, I continued to dig and found Nagato's book of Haikus. I opened it briefly and scanned through it, but I wasn't really in the mood for poetry at the time, so I put it down and continued to search. I eventually found a certain magazine still in wrapping paper… Taniguchi's gift. The one he wants back. I facepalmed as I looked at it. I still hadn't looked through it, and I originally wasn't going to. However, I was bored, and curiosity finally took its hold on me, so I opened the wrapping paper.

To my surprise, it wasn't one of "those" magazines, but it wasn't far off. I guess it could best be described as the male equivalent to those girl magazines. Of course, it still had plenty of women in it, just

no nudity. I started skimming through it. There were a few images of some famous actresses or models along with interviews of those same actresses and models. Of course I never even read a single word of what was on the pages since it seemed boring. There was also an article of girls mud wrestling in the magazine as well, which I had to admit was pretty awesome.

I was maybe halfway through the magazine when I heard my door being opened. Crap! I quickly tried to hide the magazine behind my back as the door suddenly swung open. It was Haruhi, who looked excited.

"Kyon! Guess what! I did some research and…"

She then noticed that I was hiding something. Dammit! Just where the hell does all my bad luck come from? She started looking behind me suspiciously.

"What are you hiding?"

"Nothing!"

I'm such an idiot… Did I honestly think that was going to work? A two year old would be able to figure out I was hiding something.

Haruhi marched up to me. "Show it, Kyon! What is it?!"

She jumped on me and started reaching behind me. I tried to struggle with her, but it wasn't long before she got her hands on it. I held onto it for dear life, but my hands were a bit sweaty, and it wasn't long before she ripped it from my hands. I was surprised that we didn't rip it. Of course, the condition of the magazine was the least of my concerns, as its contents were much more of an issue.

It didn't take long after she snatched it from me before she realized the contents of said magazine. She narrowed her eyes at me.

"Oh… I see…"

"Give it back!" I yelled as I tried to snatch it back. I failed as she quickly evaded me and continued to look through what was inside.

"I didn't think you were such a pervert…"

"It was Taniguchi's gift from the party," I said as I decided to give up trying to get the magazine back.

"Sure…" said Haruhi, obviously not believing me. She continued to look though the magazine, her expression hanging somewhere between unamused and pissed. She flipped through the pages in rapid succession, skimming through it faster than I had earlier. It was only after a minute that she spoke again.

"So which one do you think is the prettiest?"

I was thrown a little off guard by the question. I was more mentally prepared for a verbal assault, but I figured that was probably coming later.

"I don't know. I hadn't had the chance to look through the whole thing."

She went back to the beginning of the magazine and went to the page with the first girl on it and showed it to me. She was a petite brunette with long, wavy hair and fairly tan skin. "What do you think of her?"

"She's okay, I guess."

She then went to the next girl and showed me her. She was a red-head with short hair and blue eyes. I think I'd seen her in some TV shows recently. "What about her?"

"She's pretty cute, I guess."

She then went to the next girl in the magazine and showed me her, who was a girl with green hair with pig-tails. I was starting to get

annoyed. What the hell is she doing? Why does she care about what I think about any of these girls? "And her?"

I rubbed my eyes in frustration. "She's cute too, okay? Why are you asking me what I think of all these girls?"

She stood up and slammed the magazine down on the bed before leaning towards me. "Because as your Brigade Chief, I want to know why you would want to waste your time looking at this smut! To think that you'd spend your free time doing something so low! I thought you were above that, Kyon!"

"I was only looking at it because I was bored, and it's the only one I have. I told you that I got it from Taniguchi. I was going to give it back to him anyway. I was just curious as to what was inside."

She sat back down on the bed and crossed her arms. She then made an audible grunt while turning her head away from me.

I decided to continue defending myself. "And even if I did look at those kinds of magazines all the time, so what? I'm a guy, and I don't have a girlfriend or anything, so it would perfectly normal for me to need an outlet."

Haruhi's mood started to change after I said this. She started looking at the floor and her expression softened. She was silent for about a minute before speaking again, her voice sounding almost nervous.

"Do you want a girlfriend?"

I suddenly felt extremely awkward when she asked this question. Do I want a girlfriend? Well, to be honest, I kinda do. But with the events of the last year, a lot has happened, and I wasn't really sure I could handle a girlfriend along with all the other stuff that goes along with being a member of the SOS Brigade. At the rate I was going, I'd probably have to wait until after high school before I finally started dating. In the end, I decided to try and avoid the question.

"Isn't dating against the rules of the Brigade?"

"Let's just say, hypothetically speaking, that there was no Brigade, and you could go out with any girl you want. Who would you want to go out with?"

Not another stupid hypothetical. I was really starting to hate these. I had a feeling that giving her a specific answer would definitely not be a good idea, nor did I really have anyone I truly had my heart set on. Sure there were plenty of great candidates to choose from. Asahina-san, Nagato and Tsuruya-san were all options. And whoever said it had to be one of them? There were tons of girls at my school to choose from, some of them are even… normal! Hell, a normal girlfriend would be awesome, right? And of course if I was really insane, I could, in theory mind you, maybe contemplate, reluctantly, the very thought of perhaps, maybe, possibly going out with Haruhi… yeah right…

"I don't know…"

Haruhi wasn't convinced. "Come on! Tell me! Is it Mikuru? I've seen you drool over her before. Or maybe Yuki. Or it could be Tsuruya. Or maybe my mom!"

"What?!" I yelled, dumbfounded by her remark.

"Don't deny it, Kyon! I've seen the way you look my mom. You totally have the hots for her don't you. I don't really blame you. She's quite the looker for someone her age. We could just pretend she's not married. Would you go for her if you could?"

"No!" I said, feeling really exasperated. "You're mom's a little too old to be girlfriend material."

"Then who?"

"I really don't know," I said, trying to sound as sincere as possible. "I won't deny that there are a lot of girls I wouldn't mind dating, but I'm

not really infatuated with any of them enough to choose one over the other. I think I'd rather wait till I find someone I actually really have feelings for before making that decision."

Haruhi fell silent again after that. Her expression was a mix of relief and disappointment. Just what was she thinking asking me such a dumb question? Why is it so important to her?

I suddenly saw her eyes widen as she quickly turned to the magazine. She picked it up and slipped it in between the bed and the wall. Just two seconds after she did this, the door suddenly opened. On the other side was Oruki. My heart leapt to my throat when I saw him. Oh man I'm dead! I'm just glad he didn't see the magazine. Damn Haruhi's ears must be pretty good if she heard him coming.

"What are you two doing?"

"We're just talking about club activities," said Haruhi. I somehow doubted he'd believe her.

He stared at the both of us suspiciously before speaking. "Just make sure that if you two are going to talk to each other in your rooms that you keep the door open." He then turned around and started walking away. Wait a minute, you mean he's not going to kill me? He sure scared the hell out of me, though.

I decided to take advantage of the interruption to ask Haruhi a question. "So why did you come in my room in the first place?"

Haruhi blinked for a second before remembering what she originally wanted to talk to me about. Her face suddenly beamed brightly in excitement before she spoke. "That's right! I wanted to give you a sneak preview of an upcoming announcement I was going to give to the Brigade on Monday!"

"About what?"

"I was doing some research on the James Randi Foundation earlier, and I came across some awesome information! I found out that James Randi himself is planning on speaking publicly at a convention being held in Kyoto three weeks from tomorrow!"

Oh no… Please tell me you're not planning what I think you're planning. You're really serious about this whole war thing you're planning against them, aren't you?

"We're going to confront him face to face and publicly humiliate him! We're going to come to Kyoto on the Friday of that week right after school. We're then going to spend the rest of Friday and all of Saturday going on a huge, city-wide search for mysterious happenings. When we find it, we're going to record our findings and bring it directly in front of James Randi!"

I can't believe she's planned ahead this much already. And now it sounds like we're really going to come face to face with the internationally known skeptic himself.

Haruhi gave her million-watt smile before continuing. "The SOS Brigade is going to be world famous! We might even win that million-dollar prize, too! How much is that in yen? Isn't that like 120 million?!"

Although I knew it'd be a cold day in hell for we won that prize money, I couldn't help but smile when she brought it up. To be honest, I just hoped we don't become the ones publicly humiliated. The fact that we'd be spending a day and a half randomly searching a huge city sounded torturous enough as it is.

"What happens if we don't find anything?"

"Don't worry, we'll find something! Kyoto is one of the spiritual and religious centers of Japan! I'm certain we'll find something!"

"Well, I have to admit your ambition knows no bounds, Haruhi."

Haruhi's face beamed with obvious pride. "I bet we'll finally be able to achieve our goal of having a branch of the SOS Brigade in every school afterwards!"

You mean your goal. I personally think it's bad enough we have one SOS Brigade.

Haruhi sat for a little while longer excitedly day-dreaming before she finally got up. "It's getting late. I'm going to bed."

I said something just before she left. "Oh by the way, Haruhi. You're dad suggested I look for people wanting a roommate. I found four people that I wanted to check out tomorrow. If you want to tag along again, it'd be cool with me."

Haruhi turned towards me with a look of surprise for a second before she gave another huge smile. "Okay, sounds great, Kyon!" She then walked out and closed the door. Just before I got ready to go to bed, she opened it up one last time a glared at me.

"By the way, Kyon. I want to remind you that it's still illegal for all members of the Brigade to date anybody!"

Yeah, yeah whatever… She then closed the door after that. Before I got ready for bed, I went under my bed and grabbed the magazine and placed it in my school bag. This thing has caused me enough trouble. I'll be more than happy to be rid of it. I then got dressed in my pajamas and laid down to go to sleep. To be honest, it was another rough day, but at least it ended on a high note. Haruhi's not upset anymore, and for the first time since I got here, Oruki is treating me like a human being. I didn't have to do any back breaking labor, either. Overall, it was probably the best day I've had here since I moved in.

It was now about two hours after I'd lied down to go to sleep. I was definitely at the point where I was quickly approaching dreamland when I heard my door being opened. Oh no, did Naru-san start

sleepwalking again? I opened my eyes slightly to see what she was doing.

I was wrong. It wasn't Naru-san. It was Haruhi! Wait a minute! I've never known Haruhi to sleepwalk. Of all the times we went on overnight trips with the Brigade, she never once walked in her sleep. Then why is she now?

I watched her with my eyes narrowly open as she moved slowly towards my bed. It was then that I noticed that she wasn't sleepwalking at all. The way she was moving was too deliberate. She was tip toeing towards the bed. What the hell does she think she's doing? After a few more seconds, she finally was right next to my bed. She stood next to my bed for a minute before she carefully kneeled down, put her elbows on the bed, and rested her head on her hands.

It was dark in my room, and my eyes were only barely open, so it probably looked like I was still sleeping. In reality, my heart was pounding away like crazy. I was absolutely terrified as to what she was planning. Was she planning on doing something to me in my sleep? I can't tell. She just kept kneeling next to my bed staring at me. I was totally freaking out!

She then stood back up. Good, maybe she'll leave now and let me sleep. Unfortunately, I noticed her looking around the room nervously. What the hell is she up to? She then started leaning over me. She leaned far enough the she eventually had to support herself my resting her hands on either side of my head. Okay, now I'm really starting to freak out! I contemplated opening my eyes all the way to let her know I was awake, but I was afraid of what she might do if I did that. She stayed like that, staring down at me for a few more minutes.

And then she started to lower herself. I watched as her face came closer and closer to mine until it was only a few centimeters away. She was now close enough that could feel her breath on my face. It was fast and heavy, an indication that she was feeling very nervous

about what she was doing. I tried my hardest to slow my breathing in order to hide that fact that I was only feigning sleep, but it was hard to do. My heart was racing like crazy! I'm surprised she didn't hear it pounding away…

And then it happened. She slowly closed her eyes and lowered her head one last time. A moment later, her lips came into contact with mine. Haruhi was kissing me.

My eyes shot open as soon as she starting kissing me. I was shocked over what she was doing, but the sensation of her lips on mine… it felt really, really good. Her lips were so incredibly soft and warm. Eventually, I gave into what she was doing. I closed my eyes and started to kiss back. She was startled at first when began moving my lips, probably scared that I'd woken up, but I continued to feign sleep, so she eventually started kissing me again. We were making out like this for about a full minute she finally decided she'd had enough. She got off of my bed slowly tiptoed out of my room, closing the door behind her.

My eyes shot right open the moment she left. That moment was totally surreal. I could feel my hands were shaking a bit from the whole experience. It took a full ten minutes before I'd finally calmed down enough to register in my brain what had just happened. Haruhi had just kissed me and not just an ordinary kiss, either. We were literally making out just then.

It was then that everything started to click in my brain. The time we were stuck in the closed space together, all the times she acted jealous whenever I ogled some other girl like Asahina-san, the time when she freaked out when she found a confession letter I had wrote to Nagato (which was done for Nakagawa. I wasn't the one confessing), the time when she freaked out when she found out I spent the day with Asahina-san doing favors for her (and helping her save the life of the boy who would one day discover how to time-travel), the time when she wanted me to write a romance story of the literary clubs yearly journal, the way she acted when she found out I was moving, the sound of her voice the night after the party as she

said goodbye, thinking that she would never see me again, the fact that she asked me to move in with her, the way she kept trying to find excuses for me not to choose an apartment, the way she acted when we were hanging out with Tsuruya-san, her behavior when she found me reading the magazine, and finally the kiss… I had my suspicions for quite a while, but I always tried my hardest to leave myself in a state of denial. But there was no way I could deny the truth any more…

Haruhi had fallen for me…

I turned onto my stomach and began to bang my head against my pillow. This was not what I wanted to think about when I should've been sleeping. My mind was racing like crazy. I was feeling somewhat frustrated by the whole ordeal. Damn you, Haruhi! Thanks to you, I'm probably going to be up all night!

Unfortunately, I was right. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get the thought of that stupid kiss out of my head. By the time I had finally fallen asleep, it was almost dawn.

Damn you… Haruhi…

Chapter 8

People liked the last chapter way more than they thought they would. ^^' I actually didn't think it was my best work really. I'm also worried that every chapter I make from here on out will be compared to that last one. It's like climbing a mountain. Oh well…

I will always strive to make sure my work is at least enjoyable, although I can't guarantee that every chapter will blow you away (although I do still have some great surprises for you all).

I'm expecting this chapter to be a lot shorter than the last two. If you don't like it, too bad! :)

Chapter 8

My room was warm. It felt so good. It sure was nice. It's been a while since I could sleep in… wait a minute. I'm still in bed? What time is it? Why hasn't Haruhi woken me up yet?

I finally opened my eyes and looked that the clock in my room. It was a little past noon. I haven't slept in this long in what seemed like forever. I slowly rose from my bed and wiped the sleep from my eyes. I still wasn't fully awake yet, but I still decided to get up anyway. I had things to do today.

My eyes happened to meet up with a plastic bag with tea leaves in it. Hey, a cup of tea would be great right about now. Even if I suck at brewing it, it'd be better than nothing. I grabbed the bag and exited my room. I slowly came down the stairs and headed for the kitchen. On the way, I saw both Oruki and Naru-san sitting in the living room watching TV. They both spotted me passing by.

"Good afternoon, Kyon-kun," said Oruki in a tone that mocked me just a little. "Full of energy as always I see."

I waved weakly at the both of them, still too sleepy to really register what they said. I finally went into the kitchen and put the leaves on the counter. I took the tea pot and filled it with water and started to try and brew the leaves. To be honest, I only kinda knew what I was doing, and I would be lying if I said I wasn't half-assing it. Eventually, the water began to boil and I added the leaves. I sure hope this comes out okay…

When I was finally done, I poured myself a cup and took a sip. Terrible… I'm sorry Asahina-san. I've wasted your precious gift with my lack of brewing talent. I should have made you brew it. I continued to try and drink it, since I didn't want to waste it.

A minute later, Haruhi entered the kitchen while wiping the sleep from her eyes. Did she just wake up? She's never asleep this late. No wonder she didn't bother to wake me up.

"What happened to Carpe Diem?"

"Shut up. I had trouble sleeping last night."

She had troubled sleeping. Why would she…

And then it hit me like a ton of bricks. Last night! Haruhi… my room… kiss… Dammit! Just like how I had been up all night because my mind was racing after that, she must have been going through the same thing. I could feel my heart pounding again. I was wide awake now. I was feeling really nervous all of a sudden. I started to watch Haruhi suspiciously.

However, Haruhi was acting like nothing had happened last night. She walked up to the tea pot and poured herself a cup. She went and took a big gulp like she always does, but she was unable to swallow it. She made a grimace before she spat it out into the sink.

"Yuck! Who the hell brewed this? Was it you Kyon? It would have to be. Only you would be this incompetent!"

After hearing her yell at me, I was actually feeling very relieved. She doesn't seem to be treating me any different after what happened last night.

She then motioned for me to come closer. "Come here. I'll show you how you're supposed to do it."

Haruhi, brewing tea? I was starting to wonder if I'd gone insane. I cautiously approached her has she took some of the leaves out of the bag that I hadn't used and began to brew that tea properly.

"I'd never thought I'd see you doing this," I said.

Haruhi narrowed her eyes at me. "Just because I choose not to do it at the club doesn't mean I don't know how to."

"Maybe you should. Give Asahina-san a break every now and then. Heck, you could even put the maid outfit on while you're at it." I can't believe I just said that. The image of Haruhi wearing that outfit rushed into my brain without permission. The thought of her acting like Asahina-san… Whoa, way too much…

"Absolutely not. Mikuru has her role in the Brigade just like everyone else. Nobody is allowed to slack off, ever!"

"Didn't you say once that you would wear it?" There I go again! What's wrong with me?! Why can't I just shut up! That image is still there. And it keeps switching back and forth between that and the kiss from last night. I was starting to feel really uncomfortable.

Haruhi ignored my question and eventually finished brewing the tea. She then poured a cup for the both of us. I took my sip and… it was really good! Almost as good as Asahina-san. Figures. Haruhi's good at everything… well everything except directing movies… I'd never tell her that though.

I watched Haruhi gulp down her tea instantly. I could never understand how she does that without searing her mouth and throat. It certainly doesn't allow her to actually enjoy the tea. Afterwards, Naru-san entered the kitchen and became excited to see that there was some tea brewed.

"Ooo, did Haru-chan brew that?" She walked up to the counter and inspected the bag of tea leaves. "Oh my, these are some pretty expensive looking leaves. The premium kind. Who ever bought these must really know something about tea!"

I smiled at Naru-san's enthusiasm. "It was a gift from a friend of ours at our club. She's definitely become quite the tea expert."

She then poured herself a cup and took a delicate sip. "Wow, that's really good, Haru-chan. You've done these leaves justice."

"Thanks, mom," said Haruhi, taking her compliment like it was no big deal. "I'm going to get washed up." She then left the kitchen and went up stairs.

"So you have someone brew you tea at your club?" asked Naru-san.

"Yup."

"Wow, it must be great to be able drink such wonderful tea while you're reading!"

I blinked in confusion. "Reading? I don't do that at our club. Only one of us actually reads all the time there."

Naru-san also blinked in confusion. "Really? Oh…." She then walked away, leaving me stumped as to what the hell she was talking about.

After we both washed up and ate, Haruhi and I were once again on the hunt for a place for me to move. Since finding a place of my own

ended in disaster, I had hoped that becoming a roommate would allow more success.

While walking to the first apartment, I tried my best to not look at Haruhi too much. Every time I did, the images of last night would shoot back into my brain, overwhelming me. Her lips… her taste… damn I need to stop. I was really tempted to ask her not to come, but since I did kinda ask her to tag along last night, I knew it would be rude to change my mind. Not to mention I knew Haruhi would have a fit.

My mood was obviously quite transparent, since Haruhi eventually turned to me with some annoyance. "What the hell is wrong with you? You've been acting weird."

She must still think that I was asleep during everything that happened last night. Figures. I suddenly had the urge to mess with her, if for no other reason than to give her the message that she wasn't as sneaky as she thought. "I had this really weird dream last night."

Haruhi paused when I said that. "Oh really? About what?"

"I was in this dark room. And there was this girl there. I saw her sneak up to me and kiss me. And for some reason, I couldn't stop her."

Haruhi's face started becoming several shades paler. An obvious amount of anxiety could be seen in her expression. Serves her right. What she did was technically sexual assault. Then again, sexual assault was something she's done many times before with Asahina-san. "I see… were you able to see who it was?"

"I couldn't make her out. It was too dark."

Haruhi appeared to regain some composure after I said that. "Well, it's only a dream, so get over it."

I sighed after she said that. Was she just going to pretend it didn't happen? Maybe that's what I should do, too. Yeah, that's exactly what I should do. Last night I found out Haruhi has feeling for me… okay, maybe I always knew, but I couldn't lie to myself about it anymore. But you know what? I don't need to. She likes me… so what? She hasn't confessed to me or anything like that. I'm sure if I just act like it never happened that things will go back to the way they were, and my life can stay that much less complicated. As long as she doesn't actually confess, than I don't have to acknowledge her feelings. Yep, I'm feeling better already. Haruhi's advice was right on the mark…

That kiss is still invading my head though… maybe in time it'll go away…

We eventually made it to the first apartment. I hit the button to the apartment and waited. After waiting for a minute, I didn't get a response. I hit it again and waited… still no response.

"I guess he's not home," said Haruhi.

I pushed the button one last time and waited. Finally, someone response. "Who is it?"

"Hi, I'm here responding to your ad in the paper. I believe you were looking for a roommate?"

Soon after I said that, we were given access to the building. We made our way to the apartment that was advertised in the paper. After knocking on the door, it was soon answered by an extremely nerdy, extremely obese guy who smelled like he hadn't showered in a while.

"Sorry, I'm not usually up this early."

Early? What is he up all night? What could he possibly be doing all night long?

He then looked directly at Haruhi, and his eyes bulged enormously. I think I saw a small dribble of drool going down his potato chip encrusted face. "Oh my god, wait right here!" He then quickly ran inside for a few seconds, not even bothering to let us in. He runs right back with a cell phone and began to take pictures of Haruhi. "Wow, you're freaking hot!"

After about the fourth picture, Haruhi became annoyed at what he was doing. "Cut it out! Who said you could take pictures of me?!"

He stops taking pictures after she said something but kept ogling her. "Could you, like, cosplay for me?"

At this point, I'd grown quite annoyed at the freaks behavior and definitely knew I couldn't live with him. "We'll get back to you…"

Before I had started to walk away, Haruhi had managed to swipe the guy's cell phone from him. She then tossed it on the floor and stomped on it hard. "That'll teach you!"

Surprisingly, he didn't get mad. Instead, he gave a very creepy smile. "Oh my god, you're awesome!"

I'd had enough. He was really pissing me off, and if I didn't leave soon, I was going to deck him hard. I grabbed Haruhi by her hand and began to drag her towards the elevator.

"Let go of me, Kyon!" protested Haruhi. "I want to kick him in the face!"

"You better not. He might just enjoy it."

Haruhi blinked. "You got a point." She then looked at the fact that I had her by the hand and blushed a bit before pulling it away. "Who gave you permission to grab my hand like that?!"

"What? You grab me and pull me around all the time."

"That's because I'm the Brigade leader! You're only a lowly member! Being the leader affords me certain privileges!"

Like sneaking into people's room while they're sleeping and making out with them without permission? Damn, the image is back in my head again!

"Whatever," I said. "I'm moving onto the next place."

The next place we went to was a bit too far to walk, so we took the bus to a station that was nearby. Once we got off, we made our way to another set of apartments. These weren't locked so we were able to enter and go right to the door of the person renting the apartment.

After we knocked, the door was answered by a blond-haired woman. A rather good looking woman at that. "Can I help you?"

"I'm here because you had an advertisement for a roommate."

She smiled and opened up the door. "Oh, good! Come in!"

Haruhi and I entered her apartment, and I found the place to be… very feminine. The walls were painted pink, there were teddy bears sitting on the shelf on the wall in the living room, and the place had the fragrance of flowers in it. If I had to be honest… I hated it. I started to wonder if she was confused and thought Haruhi wanted to move in.

"So, you do realize that I'm the one asking to be a roommate, right?"

"Oh, yeah. You already said so, right?"

"Just making sure…"

The woman gave a ditzy smile directly to me. "I'm, like, totally cool with having a guy as a roommate and stuff." She then eyed me up and down and then looked at Haruhi. "Are you two together?"

Haruhi crossed her arms and looked away, while audibly grunting.

I nervously scratched the back of my head, getting the feeling things could quickly go wrong if I wasn't careful. "Um… no. Could you give the two of us a minute?"

After seeing the woman nod, motioned Haruhi outside the apartment to talk to her. "Do you have a problem with her?"

Haruhi looked away from me before answering. "Oh no. Why would I have a problem? If you want to move in with her, go ahead."

She's so obviously lying. I was quickly becoming worried that saying yes to moving in with her was a fastest means of pissing off Haruhi and putting the world in danger. Besides, I really wasn't comfortable with moving in with a girl I didn't know.

I walked back into the apartment and gave the woman a polite smile. "I'm thinking that this place isn't for me. Sorry."

"That other girl won't let you move in, huh?" asked the woman. "You shouldn't let her whip you like that. Didn't you say you weren't together?"

It's more complicated than that. You have no idea how bad things can get if I pissed her off.

She then moved closer to me and began to whisper. "Just forget about her. A guy as cute as you could definitely do better."

I never had time to respond. I watched as a foot came flying mere centimeters from me and collided with the face of the woman. She went flying back into the floor, bounced once, and came to a rest near her couch. She was out cold. I then felt a strong force being applied to my collar as I was soon dragged out of the room and all the way out of the apartment building. It wasn't until we were outside that I said anything.

"What the hell was that for? That's blatant assault! Do you want to be arrested?!"

"She couldn't be trusted, Kyon! She was a total skank!"

I facepalmed, feeling quite exasperated by her behavior. "I was going to say no to her. I didn't want to move in there, anyway."

"Didn't you notice how strong she was coming on to you, Kyon?! She barely knew you, and she was already hitting on you! It's despicable anyway for a guy to move in with a girl he's not in a committed relation with!"

I glared at her when she said that. It only took her a couple seconds before she realized the hypocrisy of her words.

"Well… In our case it's different because I already know you… and we're living with my parents too so it's okay… Shut up."

I sighed deeply before deciding to move on. There was no way I'd be moving into the woman's place now…

It's now four o'clock. Today was another disaster as we failed to find another decent place to move into.

The third place we tried was at a house. A house that was the dwelling of a creepy, radically devout Christian. Christianity has only about a small faction of the population worshipping it, but I get the feeling the vast majority of these guys weren't as weird as this guy. It was very frustrating talking to him when every word in his mouth was something about how Jesus loved me, and if I didn't accept him I'd go to hell. Now I don't know how I'd react to a guy like him before I met Haruhi, but since I spent almost every day of my life around an omnipotent being, I find the whole idea of any invisible god a little laughable. It wasn't long before we left.

The next place was an apartment that was resided by another student who went to North High. He was actually in the same class as Koizumi, which initially made me think he was a brainy know it all. He actually seemed nice enough, but main problem was during the

entire time I was speaking with him. You see, Haruhi had been glaring at him menacingly the whole time. He was already fully aware of the reputation of the SOS Brigade and all of its members, and was becoming very nervous around us. He told me eventually that he had others that were also interested in moving in and that if things didn't work out with them he would call me.

He's so not going to call me…

So in the end, two of the people I met were complete weirdoes that I'd like to never meet again, and for the other two that weren't so bad, Haruhi ultimately sabotaged any chance for me to move in with them. I was definitely regretting taking her along.

The two of us finally decided to go home since we'd gone through the entire list of places I wanted to check out. I was getting hungry anyway and was hoping to make a quick snack to hold me over until dinner tonight. I think tonight was Middle Eastern, right? That'll be interesting.

Just as I made it through the front door, I was greeted by what was currently my least favorite person in the world.

"Are you up to anything, Kyon-kun?" asked Oruki.

Oh great. What does he want now? "Not really."

"I was thinking today would be a great day for you and me to go to the dojo and get some exercise. What do you think?"

Exercise? EXERCISE?! No! Absolutely not! The pain, trauma and humiliation I felt the last time you and I went for exercise will forever be seared into mind. I would rather be given a thousand paper cuts. I would rather be whipped till my skin was raw. I'd rather drink a gallon of your wife's protein shakes mixed with my horrible tea. Hell, I'd rather die. Of course, I'm not going to be so direct.

"Gee, I sure would love to, Oruki-san, but I think I hurt my knee walking all over town, so I…"

I had a chance to finish my sentence. Before I knew it, I was grabbed by the collar once again and dragged directly to Oruki's car, an obvious indication that he didn't listen to a word I said. Damn, his strength was ridiculous. He's far stronger than any man his size should be.

So now the two of us were now on our way towards the Dojo of Doom. I stared out of the window in despair, knowing my suffering was only just beginning.

It was then that Oruki surprised me by starting up a conversation. "So, how did the search go?"

He must have been referring to my search for a place to live. I reluctantly responded. "Horribly. Two people were freaks, and the other two… well… your daughter kind of ruined any chance I had in moving in with them."

"Then don't bring her along next time you start looking," said Oruki. He's definitely the kind of person who goes straight to the point.

"If I didn't ask, she'd force me to take her anyway."

"Tell her no," he said. "It's not like you two are dating or anything… Rrriiiiiiiggghhhhttt?!"

The way he worded the question made it seem that any answer other than "no, sir, we're not dating" would result in my immediate death. Of course, I would be telling the truth anyway, so there was no reason not to tell him what he wanted to hear.

"We're not…"

"Then what's the problem?"

"It's complicated."

"How so?" asked Oruki in a tone that was half curiosity and half annoyance.

Unfortunately, I couldn't tell him the truth. I wished I could. I would love to see the look on his face when I told him his daughter had the power to manipulate reality on a whim and that pissing her off was a great way to end said reality in an instant. He'd probably think I was nuts and maybe I am. Either way, I knew I could only give him a half-assed excuse. "She'd make my life miserable if told her no."

"You're totally whipped," said Oruki in a condescending tone. "Let me give you a little advice. If you ever want respect from women, you're going to have to learn to say no once in a while. Especially if it's a girl you like. No girl wants a guy who doesn't have any balls."

Thanks for that wonderful piece of unwanted advice. I'll keep it in mind. It's not like I don't occasionally stand up to her anyway. I just have to pick my battles carefully. Sometimes, I have to back down…

It was then that Oruki changed the subject. "By the way, what kind of books do you like?"

I found this question very odd and very out of the blue. "Uh… well I like to read manga."

"Idiot! I said books! Tell me what was the last book you've actually read."

I thought about the question as hard as I could. To be honest, it had been a while since I'd read an actual book. I then remembered the book Nagato gave me almost a year ago. "There was this science fiction novel a friend gave to me. I read it about a year ago."

Oruki was silent after I said that. His mind appeared deep in contemplation. I was beginning to become very confused. I remembered what Naru-san had said earlier today as well. What was up with them asking about books all of a sudden? I eventually

put it to the back of my mind. They are Suzumiyas after all. Who the hell know what's going on in their heads?

When we arrived at the dojo, I was once again forcefully stripped and dressed in a gi. Oruki then ordered me to do various exercise drills that include running, sit-up, push-ups, up-downs, squat-thrusts, and many other excruciatingly exhausting activities. By the way, only I did these things. Damn you Oruki! I specifically remember you implying that we were both getting exercise…

Oruki then began to try and teach me some of the things he teaches his students for self defense. He showed me how to identify and use the various pressure points on the body (rather than just using them on me). He then showed me some simple submission holds that were easy to learn. Nevertheless, my exhaustion made it hard to pay attention, causing Oruki to yell at me.

"You should be more grateful, dammit! I'm giving a free lesson in self-defense! I usually charge ten thousand yen for this!"

I never asked for lessons in self-defense, free or otherwise! I just think you like to make me suffer.

Eventually, we finished and we made our way back home. When I got back, I collapsed on the couch, completely drained of all energy. Damn that Oruki!

Naru-san eventually approached me with a drink. "I figured you'd be thirsty after working so hard."

That honey-sweet smile of Naru-san. It sure is nice at least one person living here has some level of compassion. I decided to ask her why Oruki hated me so much.

She blinked in confusion when I asked the question. "Oruki doesn't hate you."

Really? He could have fooled me…

Naru-san smiled again in all her innocence. "Quite the contrary. I think he's taking a shine to you."

I raised my eyebrow at her, an obvious sign that I didn't believe her. "What?"

"I noticed it yesterday when he asked you to watch baseball. He would have never done that if he didn't like you."

I began to rub my arms, which were still quite tender from the exercise regimen. "He has a funny way of showing he likes someone."

"He's always been kind of rough that way. It's just how he is."

"He even gets under Haruhi's skin sometimes."

Naru-san became very quiet, as if she was contemplating something from the past. She seemed almost sad, even though she still kept up her smile. "There isn't a day that goes by that I'm not bothered by how much those two have drifted apart."

I blinked in surprise when she said this. "What? They used to be close or something?"

She nodded positively. "Oh yes, very much so. Before she went into junior high the two of them were inseparable." She then got up from the couch and went up to a book self and pulled out what looked like a photo album. She began to look though the album until she got to a certain selection of pictures. "They looked so wonderful together. Here, look."

She then handed me the album. There were several pictures of Haruhi as a kid along with her father. There was picture of them playing catch. There was another of the two of them running around along a beach. Probably the one that stood out the most was a simple picture of Haruhi and her dad smiling in front of the camera while hugging each other. It was a pretty warm picture and it was

probably one of the few moments I've very seen Haruhi looking genuinely happy. Her father too, for that matter. I also had to admit that Haruhi was a pretty damn cute kid.

"When I first became pregnant, Oruki used to go around hoping we would have a boy. When the doctor told us we would be having a girl, he was really disappointed. But when she was finally born, I don't think you could find a prouder father in the whole world."

I finally handed the album back when I was done. I suddenly had the urge to want to look at some old photos of my own. Too bad all the photo albums were now with my folks up north…

"So what happened?" I asked.

Naru-san's smile slowly faded to the point where it was barely a smile at all. "It all started to change when Oruki decided to take all of us to a baseball game. I don't know what it was about that game, but something about it… She just… changed."

That's right. Haruhi told me about that baseball game. She told me about all the people she saw and how it made her feel insignificant. It was at that point that Haruhi decided to try everything in her power to be as unique a person as possible, so she could stand out among the billions in this world and say that she was the one person who was different. If only she knew how different she really was…

Naru-san continued with her story. "At first I thought that maybe she was just sad that our team had lost the game, but as time went on, it became obvious that something else had happened. She stopped enjoying all the things we used to do together, saying that they were boring. She started acting up a lot at school when she went into junior high. Did you ever hear about the time where she drew all of those weird shapes on the school property?"

I nodded after she asked. I heard about it alright. I was there. "I heard about that from on of our classmates that went to junior high with her. She broke into the school and used one of the line drawers

to create some weird message." I wouldn't dare tell her that I was the one who actually drew the strange message.

"Oruki was never madder at her than when he found out about that. It was then that he started changing how he treated her. He started to become a lot stricter. He forced her to do martial arts and take piano lessons. He continually pushed her to try extra curricular activities. He did anything he could think of the try and get her to stop acting out. But it didn't work. And the harder he tried to hold her down, the larger the wedge became between them. Now they barely ever talk to each other. They're both just so stubborn."

I noticed a small tear form on her right eye. "I was worried she was going to become a delinquent, and she would ruin her life. But then she went into high school, and she started changing for the better. At first, I couldn't explain why she was changing. I thought maybe she was finally over her phase of being upset, but I eventually realized that the club she joined put her back on track. She must have finally met some wonderful people that allowed her the chance to be her old self again. Wonderful people like you Kyon-kun." I then watched that tear fall slowly down her cheek as she smiled at me. "Thank you, Kyon-kun… for saving my daughter…"

She looked so incredibly moe! She had the kind of motherly moe that a certain small percentage of the male population was infatuated with. I couldn't help but smile back. Man I wished her daughter could be as sweet her…

It was then that Naru-san nervously looked at the time. "Oh, I better check on dinner. We're having Middle Eastern tonight! Don't want to ruin it!" She then quickly hurried back into the kitchen. I continued to relax for the next few minutes while I waited for dinner to finish.

For dinner that night, we were served fried falafels and tahini served in pita bread. Once again I found myself become more cultured than ever, although I had to admit I was starting to miss Japanese food. Good thing tomorrow was Japanese night.

While we were cleaning up, Haruhi had asked me if I had done my homework. I reluctantly told her that I forgot to.

"Idiot! Why didn't you do it yesterday instead of reading a stupid magazine?!"

Okay, I'll admit I should have done it then, but I wasn't in the mood at the time.

"No more excuses! You're going to do it as soon as we're done cleaning up! I'm not allowing your poor grades to ruin the reputation of the…" Her voice then became quieter. "Brigade."

I found it odd that Haruhi had just referred to the Brigade in such a low voice. She normally would always announce it loud and clear. Never mind… I'm sure it's nothing.

After cleaning up, I grabbed my bag and started working on my homework in the dining room. Normally this wasn't a big deal, but Haruhi insisted on standing over my shoulder the whole time. She'd already done her homework, so all she had to do was ensure I did it right. This meant I had to withstand about an hours worth of verbal abuse as she continued to berate me every time I got an answer wrong. I probably would've finished my homework in half the time if I did it on my own. At least at the end I could say I understood the material.

After I finished my homework and put it away, I began to head for my room. I stopped on the way when I saw Oruki and Naru-san sitting on the couch watching a movie. Naru-san was snuggling with him, not really paying attention to the movie.

"I love you, love you, love you!"

Oruki appeared embarrassed when she said this. "I know, I know. You don't have to say it a million times." He put his arm around his wife anyway before looking at me. "What are you looking at?"

I quickly apologized and continued to my room. I can't even begin to imagine how a jerk like Oruki had gotten someone like Naru-san. And she said he's taken a shine to me. He sure has a strange way of showing it. Then again, he is Haruhi's father, so I guess it's not too much of a surprise.

By the time I finally got to my room, it was starting to get late, so I decided to lie down to go to bed. Strangely however, I found it extremely hard to fall asleep. The reason for this was that I was reminded of the night before when Haruhi… kiss me… The thought of it kept popping into my mind over and over, no matter how hard I tried to forget it. When it had become late enough that everyone would probably be in bed, I half-expected Haruhi to try and seek into my room to do it again. And for some reason, a part of me wanted her to. What the hell is wrong with me?! This is stupid…

She never did come into my room that night, though…

Chapter 9

I couldn't wait to release the next chapter. I'm also very pleased to see that my story finally exceeded 100 reviews! Yay!!!!! ^^

Some of you guys are a lot more perceptive than I thought you would be. Oh well, that's what foreshadowing is for, I guess. I do regret not making it more subtle, though. I hope this chapter meets or exceeds your expectations. I was very excited to write it!

Chapter 9

I had to admit that I slept better last night than I did the night before. I mean, sure sleep hasn't been the most abundant resource I could find since moving into the Suzumiya residence, but I'll take what rest I could find.

As with more than ninety percent of my mornings, I could not enjoy the sensation of slowly getting out of bed. Sometime during the morning, I was disturbed by some kind of burning sensation inside my mouth. The feeling became more and more painful until I could no longer stay within the confines of the subconscious. I bolted from my sleep and immediately felt that something was in my mouth. In both fear and panic, I spat whatever was in my mouth out. I was dismayed to find that the excruciating pain in my mouth was still there, and on the floor was now a strange orange-colored… thing.

It was then that noticed Haruhi standing near the door, laughing her ass off. What the hell did you do to me?! I swear I'm going to deck you if you don't tell me! She then held up what appeared to be an orange colored pepper than had been cut in half. "Habanero."

It was another scheme by Haruhi to find an easy way to wake me up. After finally realizing what was going on, I bolted past her and went

straight into the bathroom. I put my mouth in the sink and began to drink as much water as possible. Unfortunately, as soon as I swallowed some water, the fiery pain would surge back even worse than before.

Haruhi followed me into the bathroom looking somewhat annoyed. "Will you cut it out, Kyon? You're being a baby!"

"You put it in your mouth, then!" I yelled in between gulps of water.

Figuring that I was challenging her, Haruhi looked at the pepper that she held onto for a few seconds before doing just that. She bit hard into it and chewed it furiously before finally swallowing it. "See?… It's not so bad…"

Immediately after she said that, I watched as her face became increasingly redder and her eyes started to water. It wasn't long before she was obviously in tremendous pain herself. It was now my turn to crack up. I laughed at her while letting the water run through my mouth.

"Shut up…" said Haruhi as a large amount of drool flowed out of her mouth. She then pushed me aside so she too could relieve her pain with some water. Despite the pain, I couldn't help but keep laughing. Poetic justice at its finest.

Eventually it became obvious that water was not going to be enough to relieve our obvious pain. I recalled that milk and bread were decent remedies for relieving the pain caused by peppers. We both rushed down the stairs and went straight to the kitchen. I grabbed the milk first while Haruhi grabbed the bread. I quickly grabbed a large glass and poured it to the top before chugging it down. I was quickly dismayed when I found that this only relieved the pain slightly, so I had to pour another glass.

Meanwhile, Haruhi was quickly stuffing pieces of bread down her mouth to the point where her cheeks were bulging. I laughed again,

causing some milk to come up into my nose. It was all I could do to not spit the milk out.

"Shu up, Kon! It's no funy!"

I most disagree. Seeing her like this was one of the highlights of my life. What I would give to have a camera right now!

However, Haruhi turned away from me and grunted, obviously upset that I was laughing at her. I went and grabbed a few slices of bread myself. "Look, I'll do it too if it'll make you feel better."

"It won't cause it's no funy!" said Haruhi, her mouth still packed.

I started stuffing my mouth with bread to the point where my mouth was also bulging. "Dere, how dat?"

Haruhi fought hard to not crack up, but she eventually lost the battle and started laugh a bit. She had to put a hand on her mouth to prevent the bread from spilling out. Eventually she swallowed the bread and went to grab a few more slices. "Okay, it's a little funny."

It was then that Oruki walked into the entrance of the kitchen. "Why is it that you two can never keep quiet in the morning?!"

He then saw Haruhi and I look back at him, our mouths still stuffed with bread. After staring at us for a few seconds, he facepalmed. "You know what? Forget it. I don't even want to know." He then turned around and started walking away.

The pain had finally started to subside for me, so I decided to get washed up first. Haruhi was not so fortunate, since she went as far as chewing and swallowing her half of the pepper. However, by the time I had managed to finish getting cleaned up and ready to leave, Haruhi was finally relieved of the pain. She took the time to make her lunch while she waited on me, so I decided to do the same. Since the two of us had already eaten nearly an entire loaf of bread between the two of us, we never bothered with breakfast.

Haruhi and I had left early enough that we weren't in a big rush. Despite the nasty incident earlier this morning, Haruhi was in a relatively good mood, and, to be honest, so was I. Mostly I just think that Haruhi's mood was infectious. She must be excited to announce her plans to go to Kyoto with the Brigade in less than three weeks…

Why'd I have to remind myself of that? It's going to be a disaster…

When the two of us finally made it to school, I went to my locker only to run into Taniguchi.

"Hey, Kyon! How's life treating ya?"

"Fine…" I said with as little enthusiasm as possible. There are few things that could ruin my morning more than running into him before class.

"What? You're not having any fun at Suzumiya-san's house?"

Fun? No, fun is not what I've been having at her house, unless you consider back breaking labor and mean spirited pranks to be fun, which I don't!

"It can't be all bad, can it?"

No, it's not all bad. There was Naru-san, who was an oasis in what seemed to be a desert of despair. Okay, Haruhi had a few moments where she was tolerable, even… nice? But she had plenty of moments where she treated me like crap. And then there was Oruki who, other than a few moments where he showed the slightest hint of humanity, was a total nightmare. So there was a summary of my first week living with Haruhi…

It was then that Taniguchi narrowed his eyes at me. "Did you remember it?'

"Remember what?" It then hit me. "Oh, right!" I then went into my bag and pulled out the magazine. I was only too happy to finally be

rid of this thing.

"Finally!" said Taniguchi as he grabbed it. He then inspected it and noticed the mild damage it had, most of which was Haruhi's fault by the way. He then gave a goofy grin. "Ah, I see you really enjoyed looking at it!"

"I only looked at half of it."

"Sure…"

Dammit, why does nobody ever believe me about the stupid magazine? Hell, Haruhi had seen more of it than I did!

"Oh, so Suzumiya-san saw it, huh? She must've been pissed. Or maybe she liked it more than you did!" He then starts to elbow me in the side. God, this guy is such an idiot!

The two of us finally made our way to class after switching shoes. Haruhi had beaten me to class, likely because she wasn't slowed down by some sexually repressed moron. She was staring out the window with a neutral expression on her face. I get the feeling that she must know the details of the school grounds outside better than anyone else.

"Anxious about the Brigade meeting today?" I asked.

Haruhi's eyes turned to face me. She gave me a light smile. "Yup, I still need to give the others the announcement of our plans for Kyoto."

"I almost wish I didn't already know the details. Makes today meeting less exciting for me."

Haruhi narrowed her eyes slightly. "Well in that case, I won't give you sneak previews anymore." She then must've felt something itching her left eye, because she went to rub her eye with her finger. Her eye then involuntarily shut before she yelped in pain. "Ow!" She then

continued to rub her eye with her sleeve. It watered profusely, and it became very red.

"What happened?" I asked, becoming concerned.

Haruhi's eye blinked repeatedly as it continued to water. She was obviously in some pain. "I think I still had some pepper juice on my fingers."

I was then that I started laughing really hard, like when I did seeing her mouth stuffed with bread.

Haruhi punched me in the back as hard as she could. "Shut up, Kyon! It's not funny!"

Despite the pain from the blow, I kept laughing for another ten seconds. I looked up and saw Kunikida, Taniguchi and a few other classmates looking at us with goofy smiles. They held back their laughs as best as they could, lest they too became victims of Haruhi's wrath. Nevertheless, I was extremely pleased to have seen not one but two classic Haruhi moments in one day, all because she foolishly underestimated the potency of the habanero.

It looks like today will be a good day…

Haruhi had cleaning duty today, so I went to the clubroom alone. It's all for the better I guess. Having it like this will make Haruhi's big announcement all the more dramatic. After being sure to knock, I entered to find the terrific trio all in their usual places. "Hey, guys."

"Good day, Kyon-kun," said Koizumi while in the middle of setting up the chess board. "You seem to be in a good mood."

"I can't complain too much. I got to laugh at Haruhi twice today. It's starting to feel like the best day I've had in weeks."

"And she wasn't bothered by that?"

"Well, on the outside she seemed pretty upset, but I'm sure she's fine. She has no one to blame but herself for her own stupidity."

"And what did she do exactly?" asked Koizumi, his plastic grin growing ever so slightly.

I explained the events of what happened earlier to everyone who bothered to listen. Koizumi gave a light chuckle when I finished. "I must admit I would have liked to see that. Capsaicin… Are you familiar with it?"

Yes, I'm very familiar with capsaicin. That's the stuff that makes peppers hot. I had a mouth full of it this morning.

Koizumi continued with what was obviously going to be another monologue. "Yes, indeed. Let me ask you this? Did you know that birds are not affected by capsaicin?" After seeing me shake my head, he continued. "You see, when birds eat the fruit of the different varieties of peppers, they also eat the seeds. They later excrete those seeds while flying, allowing the seeds to spread. However, if a mammal were to eat the seeds, the seeds die. So you can see, the 'hotness' of a pepper is just a mechanism designed to deter mammals from eating the fruit while allowing the birds to eat it unaffected."

"And where are you going with this?"

"I'm just saying that it's an amazing marvel of nature. In fact, one could make the argument that its design was not the result of evolution, but the purposeful intent of a being of great power."

"Isn't that what you esper people believe to be the truth about the whole universe?"

Koizumi's grin grew larger still. Personally, I found that the real amazing thing was the irony that the very design used to deter mammals from eating peppers is the very reason the supposedly smartest mammal in the world decides to eat them.

Asahina-san had begun to serve the tea. "Here you go, Kyon-kun!"

Ah, to taste Asahina-san's tea after such a long weekend, my day is now complete. Seeing her did remind me of something however. "By the way, Asahina-san. I just want you to know that I now understand what it's like to be you!"

Asahina-san blinked in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"You know when Haruhi forcefully strips and dresses you and stuff? Well… Haruhi's dad…" I couldn't finish the sentence.

Asahina-san nervously smiled, probably not sure as to what to say. "Well… that's too bad… I think…"

I sighed deeply. Maybe I should have kept my mouth shut. While sipping my tea, I was sure to note that Nagato-san what currently reading what appeared to be an old copy of The Canterbury Tales. She knows old English, too? What other ancient forgotten languages does she know? I'll laugh if she knows ancient Egyptian…

Koizumi and I started our chess game shortly after that and it wasn't long before I once again was gaining the upper hand on him. The game passed the time quickly and it wasn't long before I heard the door swing open violently. Oh boy, time for the big announcement. Better act surprised… or not…

"Yahoo! Greetings Brigade!" She then moved swiftly to the front of the room. She put her bag on the table and began to open it. She then pulled out what appeared to be several pieces of paper. Quickly, she was able find some tape and stick the papers together. It was soon obvious that it was a map that had been printed out on copy paper. She then taped the map onto the black board for all to see.

"Who here can tell me what city this map is for? And you're not allowed to answer, Kyon!"

I wasn't going to anyway, thank you.

After a few seconds, Koizumi spoke up. "I do believe that's a map of Kyoto."

"Correct! 1000 points to you Koizumi!"

What the hell are those points for anyway?

"As Koizumi said, this is a map of Kyoto. And can anyone tell me why we have a map of Kyoto up here?"

Everyone was silent for a short while until Asahina-san nervously spoke up. "Are we going to Kyoto?"

"Correct, Mikuru-chan!" yelled Haruhi before she darted over to where she was and began to snuggle up on her from behind. "But, can you tell me why?" Haruhi hugged Asahina-san tightly and began to sway her back and forth rhythmically. "Don't be shy. Tell me."

"I don't know…" said Asahina-san, scared of the consequences of her ignorance.

I raised my hand to answer. Haruhi sighed in annoyance when she saw my hand up. "Go ahead, Kyon."

"We're going to confront James Randi there."

"Zero points for you for already knowing the answer!"

Aw, come on. Why can't I get any of those imaginary and completely arbitrary points? Koizumi has got a huge lead on me on those.

Haruhi let go of Asahina-san and went back to the map. "As was mentioned by Kyon, we're going to confront James Randi in Kyoto." She then points to a specific spot on the map. "This is the location of the convention center that Randi-san himself is scheduled to speak at three weeks from yesterday!" She then grabs a marker and begins to write small numbers on each of the individual pieces of paper.

"We're leaving Friday of that week, right after class. We'll be taking a train directly to the city, and we're expected to begin our search immediately after we arrive! Each of these numbers is a designated zone of the city you are expected to search!"

"Search for what?" asked Asahina-san.

Haruhi stood triumphantly, her million-watt smile in full display. "The same thing we're always searching for! Aliens, time-travelers, espers or anything else supernatural! We'll spend the rest of Friday and all of Saturday searching! And when we find something, we'll…" She then runs to the closet and grabs the camcorder we used to shoot our movie. "Use this to capture whatever we find as evidence! We will then show up at that convention and shove it down James Randi's throat! We'll publicly humiliate him and make ourselves world famous!"

"That sounds like an incredibly ambitious idea," said Koizumi, sounding quite impressed.

Personally, I think the idea of searching an entire city from top to bottom in a day and a half is an insane task, but I knew saying so would result in me being ignored. Still had to be somewhat awed by her confidence.

"I'm sure we'll even win that prize money from his stupid foundation. I say my share should be 40% and you four can split the rest!"

"Why should your share be so big?" I asked.

Haruhi glared at me in annoyance. "Because it was my idea, and I'm the leader!" After staring each other down for a few seconds, she finally relented. "Fine, we'll split it evenly. Money's not important to me anyway!"

And with that, the stage was set for what was going to be the titanic clash between the SOS Brigade and the JREF. I could even tell that

Nagato-san was at least somewhat interested… maybe. Can you feel the excitement?

Yay…

Shortly after Haruhi finished with her announcement, she decided to let club activities end a little early. This meant that Haruhi and I were now on our way back to her place. I wasn't terribly excited to head back, since I suspected that Oruki would have some kind of horrible task for me to complete, one perhaps even more painful than the last.

Haruhi suddenly paused and turned towards me. "I don't feel like going home yet. Let's go find something to do."

"Like what?" I asked, being more than happy to delay having to do my chores. We did leave a little early so if we spent some time doing something, he'd probably never know we weren't at the school and wouldn't give me a hard time.

"I don't know. What do you want to do?"

I thought for a minute about the question. "A movie maybe?"

"I'm not in the mood for that. There's nothing interesting being shown in the movies right now."

We were silent for another minute. I was completely blanking on what we could do… Hey wait a minute. Why is it that Haruhi wants to do something with me so badly? Now that I think about it, I think this was the first time she's asked me to hang out with like this. I started to get a little nervous. I was reminded of the fact that Haruhi had semi-secret feelings for me. Was this her way of going on a date with me?

Eventually, Haruhi started to get impatient. "Come on! Can't you think of something?"

"You're the one that suggested we do something. Why can't you think of it?" Just as Haruhi was about to lose interest, I made a suggestion. "Let's just walk through town. Maybe we'll find something along the way."

Although she appeared unimpressed with the suggestion, she accepted anyway. "Fine, let's go."

The two of us made our way into town. I was sure to look at my watch while we were doing this as I really didn't want us to be out all day. I was sure to get an ear full if we didn't come back at a decent hour. Most of the places we passed on our way seemed inappropriate. The library? Nope, that's Nagato's favorite spot. The park? Nah, Haruhi would be bored to tears. The mall? Well, I did know that Haruhi did occasionally like to window shop. However, I knew I'd be bored to tears with that.

It was then that I saw a recreation center. I remembered the place had lots of things to do. I'd been there a few times with my sister in the past. I'm not sure if it'll suit Haruhi's fancy, but I figured it'd be worth a try. "How about there?"

Haruhi shrugged when she saw it. "Whatever…" She sure isn't treating this like a date. Maybe I should stop being so worried. We're just friends hanging out, right? Yeah…

The recreation center seemed to have plenty of people there, some of whom were people that were from our school. I started regretting picking this place, suspecting that some of the people here might see the two of us and get the wrong idea.

"Hey Kyon! What's up?!"

Including people like him… I turned towards the voice and saw Taniguchi and Kunikida approaching us.

"Fancy seeing you two here," said Taniguchi.

I mentally facepalmed when I saw the two of them. "What's up?"

"We're here to pick up some ladies!" said Taniguchi, trying desperately to look like a big shot.

"Well, he's looking," said Kunikida. "I'm just trying to kill some time."

I bet. It's not like the two of you have any serious chance of landing a girlfriend here, anyway.

It was then that Taniguchi leaned towards me a little too close. "You two here on a date, huh? I knew it."

Why can't I get a break? Seriously, I wish I could go at least one week without someone misinterpreting something I was doing. Is that asking too much?

"Well, we'll just leave you two alone. Wouldn't want to spoil your fun."

Just before the two of them could walk off, I grabbed them both by the collar. "Stick around. We're not on a date." At least, if they hang with us, I can convince myself that this isn't a date.

Haruhi had ignored the three of us while she began to look around for something to interest her. This place had bowling, miniature golf, batting cages, an arcade, and laser tag. But there was one thing that seemed to catch Haruhi's attention. A moment later she grabbed a hold of my tie and began to drag me towards whatever had her interest.

"Hey, where are we going?!"

"I know what I want to do! Over here!"

Moments later we were standing in line for the go-kart racing track. It looked like Haruhi was in the mood to race. I guess this works. It was exciting and competitive enough for Haruhi that I was sure she'd be content with it for a while. Taniguchi and Kunikida decided to follow us and get in line.

Taniguchi gave a cocky smile. "Go-kart racing, huh? Hope you guys know how to drive. I'm awesome at this!"

The idea that Taniguchi was awesome at anything was highly suspect. I certainly didn't take his boast seriously.

A couple minutes later, our turns to go on the go-karts had come. There was a minor issue.

"I can't pay for my ride," I said, since I still needed what little money I had to hopefully try and move to my own place someday.

"I'll take care of it," said Haruhi as she paid.

"I don't want to have to owe you again."

Haruhi smiled at while putting on her helmet. "Tell you what, Kyon. If you can beat me, we're even. Otherwise, you'll owe me double!"

Owe you double? What does that mean? Does that mean I have to do double of your chores? I already do all your chores when your dad isn't around. After giving it some more thought, I somehow decided that didn't want to know.

I will say this. Hearing Taniguchi mock me from behind my back for letting Haruhi pay for me was incredibly annoying. Damn him…

Eventually the four of us and four others got into our karts as we got ready to race. Someone had managed to get both of the go-karts in the front, which pissed Haruhi off pretty bad. I imagined she was going to make them pay for it later during the race. I picked a go-kart closer to the back, not really caring which go-kart I chose. Taniguchi picked the one next to me and Kunikida picked the one behind me. So that meant that Haruhi was starting in third, Taniguchi was starting in fifth, I was in sixth, and Kunikida was in last. After we were explained how to control the karts, we were ready for the race.

It took about a lap before I got a feel for how the go-kart rode. I had hoped that my experience riding a bike would translate into go-kart driving, but it really didn't. The track was somewhat narrow, so it was hard to pass people on it. Taniguchi was the first of the four of us to wipe out. A magnificent display of his awesome driving skills. Okay, to be fair it wasn't his fault. One of the other drivers wiped out and took him with him before he could react. With both Taniguchi and the other guy out of the way, this meant I was in fourth.

I soon realized I was right behind Haruhi…

She was being held up by both the first and second place racers who were also battling for first. With the three of them constantly trying to outmaneuver one another, they were slowly losing ground to me. I tried to be patient and ride the track, desperately trying to rely on my limited experience from racing games to pull through. Eventually, I caught up to Haruhi. Fortunately, she appeared too occupied with the go-karts in front of her to notice me. We eventually came up to a sharp right turn. The go-karts in first and second decided to slow down, but Haruhi didn't. She decided to ram the second place go-kart directly, hoping that this would mess him up and give her the chance she needed to get past him. Unfortunately for her, this didn't work the way she wanted to and it caused both her and the other driver to take the turn wider than they'd wanted to. I saw my chance. I carefully maneuvered my vehicle on the inside and overtook the both of them. I could hear Haruhi yelling at me from behind.

I did it! I actually got past Haruhi! I might actually beat her! I can't wait to end this race so I can rub it in her face!

I spoke too soon…

It wasn't long after I had passed her that I came to a hairpin turn. In my excitement, I had sped up too much and I wasn't able to make the turn. I wiped out against the foam padding, which only took some of the shock out of the impact. Feeling rattled, it was only seconds before I noticed Haruhi had managed to pass right by me again. She even had the nerve to pull her lower eyelid down and stick her

tongue at me. That alone was painful enough for my pride, but what made it worse was when I saw Kunikida pass by me, too. I eventually was able to get back in the race, but it was too late. I wasn't able to catch up to those two.

In the end, Haruhi managed to snag first, Kunikida came in third, I came in fourth, and Taniguchi came in dead last. It was safe to say that Haruhi was feeling more than satisfied with herself.

"Yup, I have to admit I kicked butt!"

"I could have had you," I said.

"Only because I let you," said Haruhi smugly. "I knew you were going to blow it!"

Taniguchi once again proved to be the king of excuses. "That totally wasn't my fault. I got taken out by that crappy driver in front of me and then my car wouldn't drive right at all after that. No matter what I did it wouldn't handle right!"

I'm sure it was the car and not your complete and total lack of skill or luck, Taniguchi. I totally believe you.

After we were done discussing the race, Haruhi decided it was time to head back home before her parents got upset. I checked my watch and found it to be almost five. Yup, we better hurry. I'd hate to be late for whatever arduous task Oruki had in store for me.

While walking back, Haruhi excitedly talked about the idea of driving for real. "Maybe I should go for getting a license when I'm able to. I'd be able to drive the whole Brigade anywhere I'd want to go!" She then pretended she was driving while was continued to walk. "Maybe I'll be able to get a hold of a sports car and challenge people to street races!"

Oh please, none of that. I don't even want to know what you'd do to get your own car. Kidnap the family of some car dealer and hold

them for ransom? I'm not so sure she wouldn't do that. And let's not even discuss the other problems that would come with her ever driving. The world would be a much better place as long as Haruhi doesn't get her own set of wheels.

Haruhi turned to me with a coy smile. "By the way, Kyon. Don't think I've forgotten that you owe me double for losing to me."

"What do you expect me to do to pay you back? I'm already doing your chores and I can't pay you back with money."

"Don't worry, I'll think of something!" She gave a quick wink before turning forward again. I almost dread what she's going to hatch up. I'm sure it'll be something horrible, once again.

Nevertheless, I couldn't help but smile. Today had been a pretty good day over all. I'd say it was the best day I've had in weeks. It seemed unlikely that anything could happen that would mess my day up now.

When we finally made it back to Haruhi's place, I was surprised to see Oruki waiting for us behind the door. He had his arms crossed and he appeared less than pleased. He immediately pointed towards the kitchen. "Both of you, in the kitchen. Now!"

What the hell was this all this about? Was he mad about the time we got back? It wasn't that much later than when we usually came home. Or maybe… maybe he somehow found out about the fact that Haruhi and I went to that recreation center together. It wasn't a date, I swear it! No… that can't be it. There's no way he'd know about that. Then what the hell is he upset about?

Haruhi and I soon took our seats in the kitchen. I noticed Naru-san standing in the corner of the room looking concerned. That was bad. I think that's only the second time I'd seen her not smile since I met her, the first time being when she was disappointed that her weird paper wards didn't attract ghosts.

Oruki soon followed us in while carrying a small box. He put the box on the kitchen table before he finally began to speak. "There is something I wanted to discuss with the both of you. You see, there has been something that has been bothering me since Kyon-kun here had first moved in. At first I tried hard not to think about it too much, but eventually I started to realize something wasn't adding up."

Now I was really confused. What the hell was he talking about? What could possibly have been bothering him since I first moved in? Why didn't he say something about it sooner? And what's with the box?

Oruki continued. "Then yesterday, I had a startling realization. I finally figured out that there was something the both of you were hiding from me."

Hiding? Hiding what? I haven't been hiding anything from Haruhi's parents. Okay, maybe I was hiding the whole god, aliens, time-travelers and espers thing, but I was hiding that from everyone, even Haruhi. There's no way they should suspect anything about that.

"I don't think you've been honest with me about your club."

What? The club? What about the club? It was then that I looked at Haruhi and noticed her face had become a few shades paler. And then it hit me. I remembered yesterday when Haruhi was yelling at me for not doing my homework. She said the word Brigade very quietly, as if she didn't want her parent to hear the word. I looked at Haruhi wide eyed.

You never told them, did you? You never told them about the SOS Brigade!

Oruki sat down at the table and rested his head on his hand while smiling smugly. "So, Kyon-kun. Tell me what you know about this club of yours."

Haruhi tried to answer. "Dad, our…"

She was quickly interrupted by her father. "No no no! I want Kyon-kun to answer me."

What the hell was I supposed to say? Obviously she didn't tell them the truth. What did she tell her parents then? It was then that I remembered something else from yesterday. I remembered Naru-san question about reading while drinking tea and Oruki's question about what books I read. I got it! She must have told them that she was in the Literary Club! Great, I'll just make up some stuff about the Literary Club, and we'll be off the hook.

"Our club is the Literary Club. Everyday we…"

I was soon interrupted, however. "Cut the crap!" It was then that Oruki reached into the box. "I took the liberty of looking through your stuff. Hope you don't mind."

You bastard! What right do you think you have to rummage through my belongings? That stuff is mine, dammit!

He then pulled out a book and tossed it in front of me. The very same book the Nagato gave to me when we had the party. "Out of all the things you had, this was the only real book you had in your possession." He then picked it up and opened it. "And it's quite obvious that this was a gift from someone and not something you bought yourself." He points to a message on the inside of the cover that was written by Nagato herself. "Not to mention the fact that the book is in near pristine condition, meaning that you haven't even read the damn thing yet! All of this plus the fact that you told me you barely ever read real books tells me that you're definitely not the type of person who would join the Literary Club!"

He had me there. If I had the choice, I definitely would've never joined the Literary Club. Heck, the fact that Nagato was the only Literary Club member two years running speaks volumes about the

popularity of the club. Still, I had to try. I knew I couldn't tell him the truth.

"Yeah, you're right. I'm not much of a reader. I didn't join the Literary Club for the books." I laughed nervously as I tried to think of a reason I would join the club. "I… uh… I joined the club because of… the… the girls! Yeah…"

It was then that I heard Naru-san giggle. "Oh I doubt that, Kyon-kun. You're much too sweet."

I've been called a lot of things before, but sweet? Yeah right… By the way, Naru-san, you're not helping. Then again, you're not on my side this time, are you?

"I have to agree with my wife on this one," said Oruki. "In the short time I've known you, Kyon-kun, I've gotten to understand you a bit. And if there's one thing you are not it is a ladies man."

Yep, you're right. I can't even say that I'm a wannabe ladies man like Taniguchi. This was bad. I had to back track again and come up with a more believable explanation. I looked at Haruhi. Her head had lowered slightly, and her eyes had glazed over. I couldn't imagine the things that must've been running through her head that this moment. Her parents had singled me out, and she couldn't do anything to stop it.

I didn't give up, though. "Okay… the truth is that… the club was short on members. In order to keep the club alive, Haruhi forced me to join it." That was kinda sort of the truth anyway.

Oruki nodded his head after I said that. "I see… The funny thing is that I might have bought that explanation if it weren't for something else…" He then put his hand in the box again and pulled something else out. A red colored armband. The very same one that Haruhi gave me at the party. The words "Brigade Member #1" were still clearly legible on it. He then tossed it on the table. "I also remember

hearing the word Brigade coming from my daughter more than once over the last year. I didn't think too much about it until I found this."

I looked at Haruhi again. Her eyes had become even wider and her skin even paler. I sensed her enormous fear when she learned of her father's discovery. "Dad, listen…"

"Quiet!" yelled Oruki before he once again rested his head on his hand. He was no longer smiling, however. "So tell me, Kyon-kun. What's this brigade all about?"

I was completely stumped as for what to say. This was the smoking gun in what had been an enormous lie that Haruhi had perpetrated for the last year, and if it weren't for me, she might have been able to get away with it.

I did what I could to try and explain away the armband. "Well… I… uh… the brigade thing is a bit of an inside joke. You see, we read this book in our club about… about the misadventures of this bumbling brigade full of goofballs, and we found it so hilarious that we nicknamed our club after it."

Oruki glared ominously at me. I was getting the feeling that he wasn't buying it. "I see, so you're telling me that the brigade thing comes from a book you guys read. It inspired you so much that you named your club after it. That's funny, because apparently this book you just told me about was so incredibly inspirational, that it just so happens that neither one of you two happen to own a copy of it. And don't try to give me anymore bull crap about the book being somewhere in Haruhi's room! I went through her stuff, too! Found some pretty interesting things in there as well!" He then put his hand in the box again and pulled out a few more things. One was the original copy of the Adventures of Mikuru Asahina DVD. Another was the mega-phone Haruhi used while filming the movie. Lastly, there was another armband with the words "Ultra Director" on it. "Care to explain that?"

He had me completely in a corner. He was like famous prosecuting attorney who was about to make a witness confess to a murder. His

instincts and common sense were every bit as sharp as his daughters. I almost wondered if he'd missed his calling in life. Nevertheless, I was sweating profusely. My heart was pounding out of my chest, and my mouth was really dry. I could not think of anything to say. I was cooked, plain and simple. Sorry Haruhi… I tried…

Oruki was now showing obvious signs of anger on his face. He was no longer playing mind games with me. He wanted the truth, and wanted it now. He marched right up to me and grabbed me by the shirt. I could even make out the blood vessels in his eyes growing larger as he spoke. "Tell me the truth! What the hell is this brigade all about?!"

I swallowed hard and began to think about how to answer him. I was beginning to fear for my own safety, and I had not a leg to stand on. "Well… you're right… we're not in the Literary Club…"

"And!"

I continued to think about what to tell him. If I told him our club was about finding aliens, time-travelers, and espers, the club would be doomed. I struggled to think how to tell him the truth about our club in a way that would make it okay with him for us to continue going to it. It was then that I remembered the posters I put up in the school almost a year ago. I tried to make the school think that the SOS Brigade was a jack of all trades counseling club. The school rejected the idea, but I figured it was worth giving it a shot.

"Our club is the SOS Brigade. It stands for " **S** preading cheer to **O** ur **S** tudent body" Brigade. It's a jack of all trades student counseling club. We try our best to help solve the problems that some students have. We even help them solve mysteries and stuff…"

"Ooo that sounds like fun!" exclaimed Naru-san innocently. This really wasn't the time for her to be acting like that, seriously.

Oruki let go of my shirt and raised an eyebrow. "SOS Brigade?" After seeing me nod, he went and picked up the jewel case holding the copy of our movie. "And how do you explain this?"

"That's a movie that we made for the Cultural Festival last year to promote our club. Honest!"

Oruki looked confused. "Cultural Festival?" He then turned to Haruhi and glared at her angrily. "I thought you said your Cultural Festival had been cancelled last year?"

This must explain why Haruhi's parent never showed up to the school's Cultural Festival last year. Haruhi lied to them about it to prevent them from finding out about the Brigade. It was then that I looked at Haruhi once again. Her head was hung so low now that her eyes were now covered up by her bangs. She looked completely defeated and drained of energy. I had failed her and the Brigade.

"Nevertheless," said Oruki as he circled the table and stood next to Haruhi. "I must say that this SOS Brigade is quite different from what we were told the club was about, assuming that you have indeed told me the truth. Literary Club indeed." He then looked at me sharply. "You're excused, Kyon-kun. My daughter and I have some things we need to discuss."

I slowly got up from the chair and carefully grabbed my things. While walking away, I turned to look at Haruhi one last time. Her expression hadn't changed. Dammit, I screwed up bad. I could only hope that this doesn't end too badly.

I went back to my room, but I stood at the doorway and tried to listen carefully to what was going to be said. It wasn't long before the yelling and screaming had begun. I cringed as I listened to the enormous shouting match that ensued between Haruhi and her father. Numerous swears could be heard during the course of the argument. However, there was one thing that I heard that almost made my heart stop.

"You can kiss your stupid club goodbye! Gone! Forget it!"

I was more than smart enough to know what this meant. The SOS Brigade, the single most important thing in Haruhi's life since she first created it, was gone. For the past year she had put her entire heart and soul into the Brigade, and her father was ripping it away from her. Hell, even I had put a lot of myself into it. We all did. I was also going to sorely miss having the Brigade in my life.

But then I thought harder about it, and an enormous amount terror began to well up inside me. This wasn't a small matter about a simple club. No this was huge! The fate of the entire universe huge! It didn't take a whole lot of imagination to realize that taking the SOS Brigade away from Haruhi was one of the easiest means of causing her enough emotional turmoil to trigger her powers and cause a world reboot.

It was soon after I made this realization that the arguing had ended. I could hear Haruhi marching up the steps. She stormed right passed my door, tears beginning to roll down her eyes. She didn't even bother to look at me.

Was she mad at me? If she was, that was bad. Really bad! In the past, since the first near reboot of the world, I'd always figured that there was at least a high probability that if she ever decided to reboot the world again that I'd be the one person she'd bring along with her. Right now, I wasn't so sure about that.

It was only moments later that I heard my cell phone ring. I darted straight to it, knowing exactly who it was. "What's up, Koizumi?"

"Kyon-kun! What is happening?!" asked Koizumi, his voice only barely containing his fear.

I closed my door and lowered my voice before answering. "Haruhi's parents just found out about the SOS Brigade for the first time. Her father told her that she wasn't allowed to go to it anymore."

"I see. You're not joking, are you?"

"I wish I was," I said before asking him my own question. "How bad is it?"

Koizumi went straight to the point. "If your asking about the closed space, let me just say this. It's the largest and fastest growing one we've ever seen. Even more so than the one from the baseball tournament. There is absolutely nothing we can do to stop it."

I swallowed hard as I found my worst fears confirmed. "How long do we have?"

"Less than an hour. In that time, our world will end. It's growing far too fast for the Organization to handle it, and the higher ups are in absolute panic. You have to do something about this."

"What the hell do you expect me to do about it?!"

"I don't know. But right now, you are the only person in the entire world, no the entire universe, that can stop this. I know you can do it." He then hung up.

Save the universe again, huh? No problem. It's what we ordinary humans do best. I looked at the clock in my room. Less than an hour, huh? That's not a lot of time. And I don't have the slightest idea on how I can fix this. Should I talk to Haruhi? No, I doubt that would help. The way her mood is right now, I doubt she'd want to talk to anyone, including me. So what does that leave? That really leaves only one option.

I had to confront Haruhi's father, and somehow make him change his mind.

Doing this seemed like suicide. After all, I was sure Oruki was pretty damn pissed off at me, too. If this confrontation became physical, I would be decimated without effort. I would have to try to avoid that, but I wasn't sure if I could. I had not the slightest idea on what I

would have to say to get him to change his mind. None of this mattered, though. I was going to do this anyway. My life was far less important than the fate of the universe. The worst case scenario was that I would be murdered and then the rest of the universe would promptly follow only minutes later. At least no one would say I didn't try.

I then opened my door and slowly and nervously walked out of my room and down the steps…

Man! How was that for a cliffhanger? I hope you guys enjoyed reading this chapter as much as I did writing it. Soon we shall find out what happens when Kyon confronts Oruki! Yay!

Chapter 10

Okay, enough fooling around. It's time to get to business. I'm sure most of you were eagerly waiting for this update. Now, it's here! Let's get down to business.

Oruki is going down… or not…

Chapter 10

It's times like this that make me think, why can't a real superhero come and take over for me? I could think of numerous heroes from the manga that I have read that would be much better suited to save the world than I could ever hope to be. I'm a regular guy, with not an ounce of any special power. Hell, I don't even have any real talents. It's only through a bizarre series of events that I'm here. For some reason I still don't quite understand, I have a strange relationship with a girl with extraordinary power. I'm the only person able to influence her moods and behavior. One could possibly say that my influence is my power or talent. Personally, I think that I just happened to have been at the right place (or maybe wrong place) and said the right things (or the wrong things) to get me where I am today. I didn't initially want all this to happen, but in time I'd grown to accept it. Whether I liked it or not, I was the only person who had any hope of preventing the destruction of the universe.

Hope… that's about all I have going for me, right now.

For at the bottom of these steps was both my enemy and my objective. What did I have to do? Simple. Convince Haruhi's father not to ban his daughter from her club. How hard could it be right? Oruki is only an ordinary human, too. He didn't possess any special powers that I'd have to contend with. So why am I so scared?

It's simple. Despite the fact that the both of us are ordinary humans, it would be foolish to say that this was an even playing field. Far from it in fact. Physically, I was completely outmatched. That point was made abundantly clear when he first brought me to the dojo and proceeded to pummel me into oblivion. So there was no chance that I could bully Oruki into changing his mind. Mentally, I was not in much better shape. Only minutes ago, I was soundly thrashed in a contest of wits against him. No matter how hard I tried to lie about the SOS Brigade, Oruki easily saw through my deception and countered brutally. So tricking Oruki into changing his mind was equally unreasonable. There only one route to go. I'd have to combat him on the emotional level.

So how the hell do I do that? Do I beg him to change his mind and hope he shows mercy? I'd doubt that'd work. If there was one thing Oruki didn't have a lot of, it was mercy. Maybe I could scare him into changing his mind. How would I do that? Maybe, I'll tell him the truth, that if he didn't change his mind, the universe would end. Ha! He'd never believe that. Nobody would. Maybe I could convince him that if he didn't change his mind that his daughter would likely never forgive him and never love him again. I somehow doubt that'd work, either. He'd probably say "So be it!" and end it right there. Maybe I could convince him that the SOS Brigade is important to the school community and that we've done a lot good things for others. This was definitely a huge stretch mind you. The SOS Brigade has likely done about as much harm to the school community as it has helped. He didn't know that though. Dammit, none of these ideas seemed all that great.

It doesn't matter now. I'm near the bottom of the steps now, and he's almost in view. I sure would've liked to have seen the look on his face if he had known that he inadvertently caused the destruction of the universe. And he's not even some over the top super villain. Sure, he might be a bit of a bastard, but he's not evil. At least I don't think he is…

You know, this day had started off so good, too…

Oruki was sitting on the couch watching TV. His face still had obvious signs of displeasure. Clearly he was still pretty damn pissed off. Great. That'll make this easier… He saw me approach him, and I could see his anger rise even more.

"What the hell do you want?! I don't even want to look at you right now!"

Believe me, that makes the two of us…

"It's about our club," I said.

"I don't want to hear it!" yelled Oruki as he looked at the TV again.

I ignored what he said and continued. "The club is really important to her, and…"

He interrupted me before I could finish. "What part of I don't want to hear about it don't you understand?!" He then moved to the edge of the couch, an obvious non-verbal cue that if I didn't shut up and go that he would get up. I had a pretty good idea that him getting up would be a really bad thing.

Nevertheless, I knew that I had to stay. I'd be lying though if I said I wasn't slightly terrified. "She'd be devastated if her club was taken away from her. You have to let her keep going to it!"

"I don't have to do anything of the sort!" He then got on his feet. Oh boy… "So are you telling me that even though my daughter lied to my face repeatedly for the last year, I'm supposed to pretend it didn't happen and be okay with it?! Well you can #&*ing forget it!" He then began to walk towards in an intimidating manner. "And don't even get me started on you! I know now that you're a disgusting, lying piece of %^#! Did you really think that I wouldn't find out about you stupid club?!"

"I honestly didn't know that you didn't know until today."

"Bull%^#!"

Oruki was now almost up to me. I could see the veins in his forehead bulging. I swallowed hard. My heart was once again beating out of my chest. My fight or flight response was in full gear now. Personally, I really wished I could have chosen flight right at that moment, but what little rationality I still had left ordered me to stay put. The universe depended on it.

Oruki was now right in my face. He now spoke with a soft growl. "You have until the count of five to turn around and get your ass back in your room before I take your head and ram it through the front door."

I hope he's not serious. Please tell me he's not serious.

"One!"

Okay, he's serious. Dammit, I can't give up!

"The students at our school rely on our club for help!" Okay, that's a lie, but I had to try.

"Two!"

He's not listening. He either didn't believe me or didn't care. Either way, I wasn't getting anywhere fast.

"Three!"

"The SOS Brigade needs Haruhi. She's the clubs founder and its leader."

"Four!"

I then noticed that the sky had started turn dark. It was only maybe six o'clock right now, which was way too early for it to be dark during this time of year. It had to be Haruhi's doing. I then saw lighting. No doubt about it. This storm had almost certainly been conjured up by

Haruhi's subconscious. A manifestation of her anger and despair. I began to wonder if we were inside closed space itself. No way to know really. Ones things for certain. I could not back down.

"Five!"

I looked at him sternly, ready for the worst. "Do what you must. I'm not backing down."

By now, I'd noticed that Naru-san had entered from the kitchen, a look of deep concern on her face. I then looked at Oruki one last time. A grin had shown itself on his face. I remember hearing a crack of thunder just as I saw it, making the moment all the more ominous.

"Have it your way…"

I was quickly grabbed by my hair and dragged to the door. I tried to ignore the pain in my scalp and braced myself, expecting him to actually ram my head through the door. I could hear Naru-san pleading with her husband to let me go, but she was ignored.

To my slight surprise, Oruki didn't ram my head through the door, but instead opened it and threw me outside. I used my arm to protect my head from landing on the sidewalk. The impact of landing on the concrete was quite painful, and it took a few seconds for me to recover and stand back up. At first I thought that maybe he was just kicking me out of the house, but when I saw him walk outside as well, I realized he had something else in store for me.

"You know, I was starting to think that you were alright, Kyon-kun. But, now I've seen you for what you really are. You're a punk, plain and simple!"

This is bad! Real bad! Was he about to do what I think he's is about to do? I'm so dead!

Before I could see it coming, I felt a tremendous blow land right on my left eye. I don't think I had time to process the pain that I felt

when it happened. With what little sense I still had left, I tried to force myself to land on the grass, knowing it would be softer than the concrete. A moment later, I was face first on the ground. It took a few moments for me to recover all of my senses.

"You punks are all the same. You act all tough, but when you actually have to face up to something bigger than you, you always back down. I had hoped that our experiences at the dojo would have been enough for you to know better, but obviously you're not as smart as I thought."

He then picked me up from the ground, literally. He grabbed onto my shirt and belt and hoisted me above his head. The feeling of being lifted like this was incredibly uncomfortable, and I felt an enormous lack of control. He then tossed me several feet. I landed on the grass and bounced at least once before rolling to a stop. Damn, that hurt. I think he's really going to kill me.

I then felt something drip on my hand. What was that? Was it blood? When I opened my eyes, I noticed that it wasn't blood, but water. I felt a few more drops land on me before I realized that it was starting to rain. The wind had suddenly picked up unbelievably. I knew that it wouldn't be long before the rain would come down in a torrent. That sky was pitch black now, and I could see lighting strikes all around us. Was this the beginning of the end?

I struggled to my feet, doing what I could to ignore the pain. "You don't have to do this! Please, listen to me!"

"Why so you can lie to me some more?!"

He then launched another fist directly into my chest, knocking the wind out of me. I fell on my butt a second later, sending a shockwave throughout my body from the impact. In only two blows and two throws, I was already demolished. I had no idea how much more of this I could take.

It took a few seconds for me to regain my breath. I breathed as hard as I could to try and recover before I got up on one knee. The rain had picked up tremendously now and the both of us were now getting soaked. I looked up at him. He looked like some kind of possessed demon. Dammit, I don't want to die!

I finally stood up again and looked him straight in the eye. "You don't know what you're doing! I don't know how to explain it to you, but I mean it when I say that if you don't change you mind about this, you're going to regret it!"

"Shut up!"

I then felt another fist land right on my right cheek. I was on the ground for the fifth time. I soon discovered the coppery taste of blood in my mouth. I moved my tongue around the inside of my mouth to find a small gash on the inside of my cheek. My teeth apparently cut into it when I was punched.

After spitting out a little blood, I used whatever will power I had in me to drive myself back onto my feet. I slipped on the first attempt. The ground was completely saturated with water, and it was starting to get muddy. On my second attempt, I was more successful. Nevertheless, I felt like I'd been through a train wreck.

Oruki looked somewhat surprised that I'd gotten up again. He then went kicked me back down again. "Stay down, kid!"

Fortunately, the ground had softened enough at this point that the impact from the ground was not so bad. Nevertheless I didn't immediately have the strength to get back up. I felt the sensation of thousands of heavy rain drops landing all over me body. I opened my eyes and saw Oruki standing over me, breathing heavily, watching my every move. Eventually, he appeared satisfied that I was down for the count, so he turned around and began to walk away.

I don't know what came over me then. Was it my deep concern for the universe? Was it my desire to live? Or was it something more? I

don't know. But I forced myself up once more and called out to Oruki. "Wait! Come back!"

Oruki looked back at me with confusion. "Glutton for punishment? Fine…" He then marched up to me and threw another punch to my gut, and another blow to my solar plexus. I crumbled once again, this time landing near his feet. I gave an audible cry of pain when he did that. I can't remember that last time I'd hurt so badly.

"I know that hurt, kid. Do yourself a favor and don't get back up. Don't make me have to send you to the hospital."

It took a few moments for what he said to register. I started thinking to myself that I'd probably never make it to the hospital before the world would end. Dammit, I have to get up again don't I. It hurts so bad. I just want to pass out. No, I can't! This sucks! Got to get up! Here we go…

By the time I tried to get up again, Oruki was almost to the door. When I finally lifted my head off the ground, I began to cough. I tasted some more blood in my mouth. Great, don't tell me I'm bleeding internally or something. Ignored this and continued to get up. I called out to Oruki once more to prevent him from getting inside. "Stop!"

Oruki turned around and appeared almost bewildered when he looked at me. He stared at me for a good few seconds before speaking. "What the hell is wrong with you?!" He then walked towards me once again. The thunder around us had gotten louder than ever and the wind had reached a strong gale. Even Oruki himself appeared to be concerned with the weather outside. "Do you have a death wish or something?!"

When Oruki finally got up to me, I went and grabbed onto the front of his shirt with both hands and held onto it with all of my might. "I won't let you take our club away from her!"

Oruki looked down at me in amazement. He seemed almost at a loss for words. It took what almost seemed like forever before he could respond. "Why are you doing this?"

I didn't have a good answer for him. It wasn't for lack of trying; it's just that I wasn't sure myself. I'd seen in anime and manga where the hero would get the snot beaten out of him to the point of near death and they'd still get up. At some point they would always have something heroic or inspirational to say to the enemy, which would be the pinnacle of absolute awesomeness. The problem was that I never thought I'd be in a similar situation, so I never planned on having anything awesome to say for this kind of moment. So, now what? I need to say something. I guess I'll say whatever is on my mind…

"I'm doing this because I'm a Brigade member! And Haruhi is my Brigade Chief!"

… That was the corniest thing I've ever said in my entire life. I completely blew the moment. I really hoped beyond hope that no one other than Oruki heard that. If this were a story or an anime, I was sure that whoever saw or heard that line would be laughing their asses off at me.

Seconds later, I heard the sound of wet footsteps coming towards us quickly. "Dad, stop it!" Only moments later, Haruhi had come in between the two of us and had pushed her father away from me. She then held her arms out to the sides as if she was trying to protect me. "I won't let you hurt him anymore!"

You're a little too late if you ask me. I'm already plenty hurt.

Oruki stared at the both of us for a few seconds before groaning in frustration. I wondered if he was starting to feel some remorse. Before I could find out, Haruhi grabbed me by my hand and pulled me towards her. She put my arm around her shoulder and helped carry me into the house. It was then that I noticed Naru-san had

been standing near the doorway the whole time, looking fairly distraught. "Are you okay?!"

I didn't get a chance to answer since Haruhi carried me right passed her and took me right up the stairs. A minute later, I was in the bathroom while sitting in the toilet. Haruhi began looking at my face and chest to inspect the damage. After about a minute, she sighed deeply.

"Idiot. You didn't have to go and pick a fight with him."

It was more of a thrashing than a fight. I never actually tried to attack him. Although I get the feeling that if I had the result would have been the same. I got the feeling that Haruhi would be a little more receptive to anything I would say right now, so I spoke. "I'm sorry… for telling your dad the truth about the club."

Haruhi stared at the floor looking somewhat ashamed. "It's not your fault… I should have told you that I hid it from them." She then stood up. "I'm going to get you an ice pack. Stay right here." She then walked out of the bathroom and down the stairs.

While I waited for her, I could feel the water all over my body rapidly absorbing the heat from my skin. Soon I was starting to get goose bumps all over my body as a chill went up my spine. I could also feel my eye and cheek getting puffy too. Man I felt like crap.

Soon Haruhi returned, ice pack in hand. She carefully placed in on my left eye. "Hold it in place for a while." When I placed my hand on the ice pack, my hand briefly touched Haruhi's. She seemed mildly startled when she felt my hand on hers. She then grabbed my other hand. "You're freezing. Why didn't you say anything?" She then went into the linen closet, grabbed the largest towel she could find, and draped it over me. It took a minute for the towel to help warm me up.

"You should get changed after you're done icing your eye. Let me look at it one more time." I took the ice pack off of it so she could look. She inspected my eye carefully. "It's definitely going to bruise."

It was only then that I'd realized that Haruhi's face was really close to mine. I could feel her breath on my face again, and I was quickly reminded of the other night when Haruhi snuck into my room. I felt my heart beginning to race as I continued to look into her amber orbs. For a moment, I'd completely forgotten about my miserable state and began to lose myself in the moment. It wasn't long before Haruhi made the same realization, and her eyes quickly shifted from my left eye to both my eyes. We were both motionless for what seemed like an eternity, our faces only a couple inches away. It could feel my neck tensing up, as if it was at war with itself. It almost felt like some of my muscles wanted to lean in towards her, and the other muscles were resisting. I could feel myself becoming dizzy as my confusion peaked. My eyes then quickly darted to her lips. The same lips that… yeah, I remember so clearly now. I remembered how they felt. So soft. I could feel my neck beginning to move ever so slightly towards her. And it looked like she was about to do the same. My heart continued to race harder and harder as we slowly moved forward until…

… until I heard the sound of someone clearing his throat…

Haruhi and I quickly turned towards the door. We both knew it was Oruki, but all we saw of him was his shoulder and arm. He was leaning against the wall next to the door outside, his back towards us. When I was sure it was him, I looked away, not wanting to look at him. I noticed Haruhi doing the same.

"Listen… about your club… we'll talk about it tomorrow… But for now I think it's best that you two go back to you rooms…"

After he said that, he walked away into was sounded like his room and closed the door. Haruhi stood up as well and began to walk towards the door. She paused before she reached it and looked back at me. "By the way…" She appeared to struggle with her words for a second. She looked almost embarrassed. "Thank you…"

I returned her a smile. I'd gotten an apology and a thank you from her all in one week. I never thought I see the day. "No problem. Did

you expect any less from a Brigade member?"

She smiled lightly at me before she started to walk off. "Just be sure to get changed before you catch a cold. That's the last thing we need right now."

After she had gone out of site, I slowly and painfully got off the toilet seat and walked to my room. My school clothes were soaked and muddy. I didn't know what I was going to do tomorrow. Oh well…

After I changed into something considerably dryer, I went and laid on my bed to rest. It wasn't until I had a chance to think that something started to really worry me. Was I about to kiss Haruhi? That moment we had before Oruki showed up… there was no doubt about it. I was really going to kiss her. Why? What was I thinking? Am I losing my mind? No, maybe my brain was knocked out of whack from those blows to my head. That must be it. No way that if I was in my right state of mind would I have done that. Yeah…

Luckily, the ringing from my cell phone had managed to rip me back into reality. I had a pretty good idea it was Koizumi again, hopefully with good news. "Hello?"

"It's me again. I don't know what you did, but I'm glad you did it. The closed space's growth has slowed significantly. Not entirely mind you, but enough that we can handle it from here."

"That's good. In any case, you're likely to find out how I saved the universe soon. It'll be impossible for me to hide the bruises."

Koizumi was silent for a second, as if he wasn't quite sure how to respond. "I see. Well, as long as it worked. Unfortunately, I probably won't be able to see you tomorrow, seeing as it'll take a very long time to shut this closed space down." I noticed his voice only barely hid his lack of enthusiasm for his upcoming task.

"Well, have fun Koizumi."

"I'll do my best…" said Koizumi in a tone that obviously already knew fun was not on the menu for him.

I hung up the phone and lied back down. I noticed that the sky had cleared up a bit. I did what I could to fall asleep, but I was pretty wound up after what had happened earlier today. I turned my head and noticed the wooden turtle I had gotten from Oruki. I couldn't help but feel like that it was mocking me somehow. With the way I was feeling, I almost wanted to throw the damn thing out the window.

A small while later, I heard a knock at the door. "Who is it?"

"It's me," said Naru-san. "I thought I'd bring you dinner. Can I come in?"

"Of course," I said. Naru-san was always welcome to come in my room… wait, that came out wrong. Never mind…

Naru-san opened the door, revealing a tray in her hand. It's Japanese night, right? I was starting to miss food I was actually used to. I thanked her after she placed the meal on my bed. She then stood there for a couple minutes watching me eat. She looked somewhat depressed, although she tried to hide it with her honey sweet smile.

"Is something wrong, Naru-san?"

Naru-san sighed heavily before answering. "I'm sorry I didn't stop my husband before. It's hard for me to stand up to him… I don't like confrontation."

I smiled at Naru-san, letting her know that she was forgiven. "I understand. You're definitely not the violent type. As mad as he was, I'm not sure anyone could have stopped him."

"I know it can be hard to believe, but my husband's a good man," said Naru-san with a frown. "It's just sometimes he gets carried

away. He used to be a ruffian when he was young. I know I shouldn't make excuses for him, but I'm sure he feels bad for what he did."

It was then that Naru-san appeared to have thought of something. "Oh, before I forget, let go and wash your school clothes for you. I'm sure they're an absolute mess."

"Oh, thank you. I appreciate it."

After grabbing my school clothes, Naru-san politely bowed and left my room. I continued to enjoy my meal, savoring the taste. While I ate, I heard Naru-san knock on the door to Haruhi's room. I could barely make out what they were saying.

"Haru-chan! I've got dinner for you!"

"Go away! I'm not hungry!" Obviously, Haruhi's far from feeling joyous. Seems like she's going to go through one of her bouts of melancholy again. Not that I'd blame her.

"Okay! I'll leave the tray outside your door if you change your mind."

That was last thing I heard from anybody for the rest of the night. After finishing my meal, I put the tray down on the floor and lied down on the bed. With my stomach full of food, it was much easier to fall asleep. It still sucked that my day when from really good to absolute crap. I just hoped that things would get better tomorrow. I still didn't know what's going to happen to the Brigade. I'd like to think that I didn't get the crap beaten out of me for no reason…

Sorry for making the chapter a little shorter than usual, but I didn't want to leave you guys hanging. I certainly hoped this chapter wasn't a let down for you.

As for some of you thinking this was the climax, you are wrong. I've still got a lot a great surprises coming your way. I'm actually

not even halfway done with the fic (although I am close to halfway).

So, what will happen to SOS Brigade? We'll find out next chapter…

Chapter 11

I still love the responses I'm getting from this fic. It certainly is a good thing that you guys are still enjoying my work.

Enough talk though. Time to get the next chapter on the road.

Chapter 11

All through out the night, I was having some of the most vivid dreams I have had in a while. One of them was even stranger than the dream I had burying my cat.

In this dream, I was a dog. That's right, a dog. And not a big dog, either. I was one of those little terriers. I wasn't alone, though. With me at first was Haruhi, who was dressed in a blue and white dress and was wearing red, glittery slippers. Later we ran into Koizumi who was a scarecrow, Nagato, who was some kind of tin woman, and Asahina-san, who was a cowardly but cute lioness. We were walking along this weird yellow brick road to some weird city.

Along the way, we ran into the older Asahina-san, who was the good witch of the north, Tsuruya-san, who was the wicked witch of the west, Taniguchi and Kunikida, who were some blue colored ape-men with wings, and even the Computer club president, who was the door man to the city. We even met up with the Wizard, whoever he was supposed to be. He looked like some giant evil head. Oh, and Haruhi's father was playing his role.

Unfortunately, before I could find out the conclusion of that ridiculous dream, I started to feel a tremendous pain in my left eye. It continuously got worse and worse until eventually I had to wake up.

I soon discovered that Haruhi, who was already dressed I her school clothes, was poking me right in my eye, the same one that was badly

damaged the night before. Just as I was about to scream in pain, Haruhi placed her hand on my mouth to silence me. She then held her finger to her lips to emphasize this point with a shush.

I removed her hand from my mouth and hissed. "Why'd the hell did you do that?"

"What? I was trying to wake you up," said Haruhi, her voice at a whisper.

"Did you have to poke my eye?"

Haruhi shrugged and stood up. "It worked didn't it. Hurry up and get ready."

I gave a large yawn before looking at the clock… Hey, it's an hour earlier than when we usually get up. What's the big deal?

I finally got out of bed and… felt an enormous about of pain all over my body. The endorphins that were flowing through my body last night were now gone, and my body was now feeling the actual damage that it had received. Even my wrist and tailbone hurt, likely from impact of falling on them several times last night. Doing what I could to bear the pain, I moved slowly towards the door. Just as I got out of my door, I saw something fly at my face. I instinctually caught it, and discovered that it was my school clothes. They were all clean.

"Looks like my mother finished cleaning them last night," said Haruhi as she began to walk down the stairs. I put my clothes down on my bed and made my way to the bathroom.

The first thing I did was look at myself in the mirror. And to my complete lack of surprise, I discovered that I had a nice looking shiner right on my left eye. That and my eye was completely red now from all the blood vessels in it being popped. My right cheek was puffy as well. When I began to take a shower, I found my chest had several bruises as well. One thing was for sure. Everyone at school

was going to be able to see that I got the crap beaten out of me. Man it's going to be annoying.

After I finished showering and getting dressed, I slowly made my way down the stairs and into the kitchen. Haruhi had already made breakfast, even though it was just one of those crap microwavable breakfasts. She even made our lunches, too.

"Why the hell are we in such a rush to get out of here?"

Haruhi made a scowl. She wasn't scowling at me, though. She was just scowling at whatever she felt like scowling at. "Because I don't want to look at him, that's why."

It didn't take long to figure out who she was referring to. To be quite honest, I didn't want to look at him, either. The two of us finished our breakfast as quickly as possible before we finally left.

The sidewalks were deserted as we made our way to school. I guess it shouldn't surprise us, as almost no one would go to school this early in the morning. The walk there was very quiet. Haruhi never bothered to say anything to me, and continued to be in a bit of a daze as we made our way to school. It felt a bit awkward, really.

When we finally made it to the school, we found that the door hadn't opened yet. As a result, we were forced to sit outside while we waited. Once we were situated, I noticed Haruhi opening her bag. "Did you ever do your homework?"

"Nope."

"Neither did I," said Haruhi. I guess that doesn't come as a surprise considering how she must've felt last night. It's rare for Haruhi to put off things. "We should do it now. It shouldn't take too long."

So Haruhi and I decided to do our homework while we waited for the doors to the school to open. I found this to be quite a chore, since the wrist that I wrote with was also the one that hurt like hell. I guess

the good news was that doing homework with Haruhi meant that it would be done as fast as possible. Damn I wish I was a smart as her.

Around the time we were finishing up, we saw the doors to the school being unlocked. We went in right after that and went straight to our class. We were the first to enter the classroom, which I had to admit was a pretty weird feeling. Haruhi immediately sat in her seat and buried her head in her arms. Yep, she's in melancholy mode. Man this sucks. I really can't stand it when she's like this.

I decided to talk to her anyway, if only to pass the time and maybe get mind off her melancholy. "So… how did you manage to convince your parents that you were in the Literary Club?"

Haruhi lifted her head slightly to look at me. She was silent for a few seconds, as if she was fighting to find the will to talk. "It was hard at first. In the beginning, I went and bought random books and pretended I was supposed to read them for the club. It was enough for my parents at first, but my dad got suspicious eventually when he discovered that some of his stuff had gone missing. I told him we needed it for the club, but he started asking for proof. He really started breathing down my neck about it until I gave a copy of that journal that we worked on to save Yuki's Literary Club."

That's right. I remember that now. To prevent the Literary Club from being shutdown and us from losing the clubroom, the Student Counsel President forced us to write up a literary journal. Although it was a bit of a pain to write that stupid non-romance story that I eventually came up with, I thought the whole experience was really interesting. No wonder Haruhi's parents were fooled. The journal had all of our names on it, so it would easy to think it was legitimate.

"They stopped bothering me about it after that, until you moved in." She then sighed deeply and buried her head further into her arms. She kept talking however, but her voice was somewhat muffled. "I don't know why they have to push me so hard to join a regular club, anyway. I'm not a kid anymore. Why can't I have the freedom to do

what I want with my free time? The two of them get to goof off whenever they want. It drives me nuts. I can't stand either of them…"

"Your mother, too?" I asked. "Now that I think about it, what wrong with your mom? I mean, I can understand you not getting along with your dad, but I figured you'd be a lot closer to her."

Haruhi turned her head to look out the window before answering. "She always takes his side. No matter what it is, she never once takes my side. And a few times, I confided in her about some things that I wanted to keep only between me and her, but she would go and tell him anyway. I couldn't believe that she would do that. After that, I realized that I couldn't trust her. She would always choose him over me."

"I see," I said as I discovered another piece of the Suzumiya puzzle. I had no idea that the relationship between Haruhi and her parents would be so complicated. I wished I could've told her that I could relate, but that would be a lie. I never had these kinds of problems with my parents. There was a part of me that wished I could do something, but the other part quickly told me that there was little I could do. It would ultimately be up to those three to settle things in the end. I just hoped it happened before the untimely destruction of the universe.

Haruhi then sat up and grabbed a piece of paper from her bag as well as a marker. "I better take care of this now." She then quickly wrote something on it. When she was finished, she put it down for me to see. On it she wrote:

"Attention Brigade Members: All Brigade activities are suspended until further notice."

She stared at the paper painfully for about a minute. She closed her eyes tightly to try and avoid what appeared to be tears from coming out. "I'll have to put this up on the clubroom door during lunch." She then put the paper carefully in her desk and proceeded to bury her head in her arms again.

After that, other classmates began to enter the room, and it wasn't long before everyone began to notice my condition. I groaned quietly in exasperation every time a classmate entered the room and noticed the black eye and the puffy right cheek I had. Eventually, I started trying to hide my eye behind my hand, but it was really too late. Those who saw my eye earlier were quick to tell their classmates about it. By the time Taniguchi and Kunikida had entered the class, I'd given up on hiding my eye and accepted my fate. Rumors were going to fly about the school. Everyone will probably think I was in a fight. It wasn't a fight, dammit! It's only a fight if I tried to fight back.

After they put their bags down, both Taniguchi and Kunikida approached me.

"What the heck happened to you?" asked Kunikida.

"You look like you got into a fight with a truck," said Taniguchi.

I turned my eyes towards the window, trying to make it obvious that I wanted to be left alone. "I'll talk about it later."

They left me alone and class started soon after that. Every teacher that came into our class had to pause briefly every time they saw me. Yes, it's a black eye! So what? Please stop staring at it! It's so annoying!

When lunch finally came, Haruhi quietly left the room in a manner that lacked even the slightest amount of energy. She was sure to take the paper she wrote with her. This of course meant that I had to sit with the other two while eating lunch. My wrist was still bothering me too, so eating was a pain.

"So tell us what happened," said Taniguchi without wasting time. "Who'd you get into a fight with?"

"It wasn't a fight. It's more accurate to say that I was attacked."

"Who would do that?" asked Kunikida.

I somewhat reluctantly answered. "Haruhi's father…"

"Ouch!" yelled Taniguchi with a bit of a cringe. "What, did he catch you making out with Suzumiya-san?"

"No!" I yelled in total exasperation. Damn he's so obnoxious. "It turns out that Haruhi never told her parents about the SOS Brigade, and they found out about it. She got banned from her club, and in trying to talk her father out of it, he beat the crap out of me."

"Man, he sounds like a huge jerk," said Kunikida. "I noticed that she looked really down, today."

"Yep…" I said as I looked at my lunch. I noticed that it was made from what we had for dinner last night. Knowing that the Suzumiyas almost never have leftovers, I started to suspect that Haruhi never ate her dinner last night and instead used what was on her plate to make lunch for the both of us. I mentally shrugged and ate it anyway. Even if it was leftovers, it was still damn good.

School was now over, and for only the second time since the club was first started, I found myself walking home when class ended instead of going to the club. I was reminded of how weird it was walking home with so many people also on the streets also walking home. I had to imagine it was weird for Haruhi, too. She was quiet the whole time, though, so I wasn't really sure what was going through her mind. The sounds of idle chatter from other students and cars racing by were the only things I heard the entire way home.

I couldn't help but notice that even though we were going down hill the whole time that Haruhi was walking considerably slower than her normal pace. And as we came closer and closer to home, her pace became slower and slower. By the time we got to the street she lived on, her pace was at almost a crawl. I then realized that Haruhi was

simply delaying having to get home, likely because she didn't want to run into her father.

I tried to reassure her as best as I could. "Maybe if we're lucky, we won't run into your dad when we get back."

I heard Haruhi sigh deeply as she picked up her pace ever so slightly, perhaps to get it over with.

Unfortunately for us, the moment we opened the door, Oruki was waiting on the other side. Wonderful… I noticed that Haruhi brought her eyes to the floor, never bothering to look at her father in the face.

"Hold it right there," he said with his hand up. "Your mother and I talked about what we should do about your club, and we came up with this." I noticed Naru-san approach from behind, giving us a light smile before her husband continued. "The truth of the matter is that you lied to us. That cannot go unpunished. As a result, you're grounded for the rest of the week. You are to come home immediately after school and go straight to your room. On Saturday, however…"

We were then hit with a bombshell.

"… You're going to have one of your club meetings here."

Haruhi's and my eyes shot wide open when we heard this. Wait, he wants us to have a club meeting… here? In Haruhi's house?

Oruki crossed his arms and gave a smug smirk. "Your mother and I want to see this club for ourselves. After all, Kyon-kun here said himself that you guys are in charge of solving mysteries for others, right? We want to see you guys in action. We want to see this… what the name of you club again?"

"The SOS Brigade," I answered.

Oruki paused for a second upon being reminded of the name. "R… right… If this… SOS Brigade is everything he said it was, then you're free to continue with it. If not, then you're to never go to it again."

Haruhi and I looked at each other when we heard this. I wasn't sure what she was feeling, but I was feeling a mixture of relief and nervousness. After all, even though this was a chance to save the club, most of what I said about the club was a huge stretch at best. Most of the time we just goofed off.

"You guys okay with that? Shouldn't be a problem after all. You were telling me the truth about your club yesterday, riiiggghhht?"

"R… right," I said. "I… it sounds like a great idea."

Haruhi never responded. Perhaps she didn't know what to say. She certainly seemed a bit off guard by the idea.

"Great!" said Oruki as he pointed upstairs with his thumb. "In that case, time for you to head upstairs. We'll call you down when it's time for dinner."

Haruhi and I began to walk towards the stairs, but a hand grabbed my shoulder before I could go any further. Oruki's hand in fact.

"Where do you think you're going? You've got work to do."

Are you kidding me? After all you did to me last night, you're still going to make me work? I was wrong. You truly are an evil person.

"Quit your belly aching! It's not going to be that hard!"

That's not the point. You're lucky I didn't call the police or something over that.

"Look, all I need you to do is shampoo the carpets. I even took the liberty of moving the furniture and setting up the carpet shampooer. The rest is easy."

When I went and looked in the living room, I found that he did in fact move the furniture. The only thing that was still in the room was the shampooer. After Oruki showed me how to use the machine, I went about using it. Of course, Oruki was down my neck the whole time, constantly yelling at me for going too fast or for missing a spot. What should have been have been a quick simple job took that much longer because of him. Eventually, I got the job done and had to wait for the carpet to dry. While we were waiting for it to dry, Oruki decided to say something to me.

"Look… about last night. I know that I went too far."

Oh, you think? You know, until you said something I wasn't so sure.

"I was just so mad that I was lied to, not just by you, but my daughter, too."

And this justifies assault how?

"But I realize now that you did that to protect my daughter and your club."

Well. I mainly did it to protect the club… well and maybe Haruhi by extension. Wait, did I really care about the club that much? I… I guess I do.

"Obviously if this club wasn't so important to you, you wouldn't have allowed yourself to take the beating that you did. That's why I'm allowing you guys to prove yourselves. In any case, I'd say that we should call it even. You lied to me, I beat you up. And that evens things out."

What? On what planet does that even things out? There's no way that what I did equals to what you did. Not even close…

"I think it's best that we forget that the whole thing happened."

I agree. I would love to forget the whole thing. There's one problem, though. You see, my body is not so forgetful. In fact, right now it's sending me painful reminders of what happened last night. So until it stops reminding me, you can bet that I'm not forgetting anything, Captain Caveman!

In the end, I realized that this was about as close to an apology that Oruki was ever going to get. After he'd finished giving me his awkward speech, I went into the kitchen to get something to drink. In there, I found Naru-san preparing dinner. She was in the process of peeling potatoes. Just as I was about to open the refrigerator, she spoke to me.

"What'd you think about the idea of you guys having your club here? It was my idea."

I blinked in surprise as I grabbed a soda from the fridge. "Really?"

She nodded with glee. "I thought the idea of your club sounded so much fun that I wanted to see it for myself. The idea of a club that helps solve mysteries." I could see her bounce with growing excitement. "Oh, I wish I had a club like that when I was in high school! I'm so jealous! And I love the name of your club! SOS Brigade! Yay!"

You would, wouldn't you? You and your daughter are probably the only people in the entire universe who would like that name.

"I think I'm going to make a banner and decorations! Maybe we can make it a huge party and have lots of fun! What do you think the banner should say?"

I swallowed hard, trying to think of what to say. "Uh… I think a banner might be a little too much."

Naru-san gave a cute frown when I said that. "Aw… okay…" She then went and started peeling her potato again. "It's just that… I figured it was the least I could do…"

"What do you mean?"

She turned around to me with an even larger frown. "It was my fault that everything happened yesterday!" After giving a deep sigh, she continued. "I was worried when you told me that only one person actually read anything in your club, so I told Oruki about it."

It figures. Haruhi was right. She tells her husband everything.

"And because of that, Oruki eventually went and looked through your room and discovered that stuff, and it all went down hill from there. Oh, I'm such a terrible person!"

I smiled at her reassuringly. "There's no way you could have known that would've happened. You were just being a concerned parent."

Naru-san appeared almost in tears at this point. "My daughter probably hates me now."

"No she doesn't."

"Yes she does. She never talks to me anymore. She must hate me."

I mentally sighed in exasperation. Sometimes, talking to Naru-san was like talking to a child. She's way too innocent for her age. It's cute, I'll admit, but it constantly makes me wonder how many screws are loose in her head. Nevertheless, I remembered my talk with Haruhi earlier and tried to use what I knew from that to help.

"Look, I won't claim that I know everything that goes on in your daughter's head. But… I don't know… sometimes I think that even she needs a role model. Someone… to talk to when she confused… about 'girl' stuff…"

Naru-san blinked in confusion at my suggestion. "Huh?"

She can't be this dense. Seriously. I can tell now where all the brains in the family came from.

"She needs to know that if she talks to you about stuff that you won't go and tell everything about it to your husband."

"Oh…" she said as she began to nod. "You're right. I shouldn't do that, but it's hard for me. I have this habit of wanting to tell people what's on my mind, and it's really hard for me to hold it in. Whenever I have a secret, it's impossible for me to keep it in. No wonder Haru-chan hates me." I could see the tears well up in her eyes again as she began pulling on her hair.

I once again tried what I could to calm her down. "Look, maybe you could write it down, instead, or find something to keep you busy when you feel the need to tell a secret. Or maybe you can tell me, instead. I'm good at keeping secrets." Hell, I've been keeping some huge ones for over a year now. Okay, so I did technically tell Haruhi the truth about the other members of the SOS Brigade quite some time ago, but she didn't believe me, and I never went out of my way to prove that I wasn't messing with her.

Naru-san sighed deeply again before she gave a large smile. "Thank you, Kyon-kun! You're the best!" She then gave me a really big hug. At first I was worried about her husband, who was in the other room, catching us, but when I felt the pain of my bruises being pressed on, my concerns changed.

"Uh… Naru-san… you're hurting me…"

Naru-san paused for a second, likely from confusion before she realized what was happening. "Oh, I'm sorry." She then let go and gave an embarrassed smile. "I hope I didn't hurt you."

I tried to play it off as no big deal. "I'm fine. See ya, Naru-san."

Wait, was having her tell me Haruhi's secrets a good idea? Maybe, I should tell her not to do that… But then again, learning some secrets wouldn't… ah, maybe she won't say anything to me.

After leaving the kitchen, I saw Oruki beginning to struggle with getting the couch back into the living room. As strong as I knew he was, even he was having difficulty getting it in.

"You okay?" I asked.

"I'm fine," said while tugging on the couch. "This is nothing I can't handle. I got it out. I can get it back in."

Maybe I was crazy, but seeing him struggle with the couch made me feel bad for him. I really shouldn't feel bad for him. He did deserve to suffer after all. However, something inside me told me I should help, even if I was in pain. Maybe I wanted to be on his good side or something.

"Let me help."

"Forget it!" yelled Oruki the moment I made the suggestion. Eventually he let go of the couch to catch his breath. "I'm not so old that I need help with every little thing."

There's a big difference between every little thing and lifting a couch.

"Besides, aren't you still hurting from last night?"

"I'll live."

He gave me a smirk after I said that. "I get it. You're trying to look tough, right?"

No, I'm not! Are you so pumped up with ridiculous amounts of testosterone that you're unable to figure out when someone's actually trying to be nice? I give up…

"Fine, go ahead and help. I'd like to get this done before the game starts tonight anyway."

The two of us went and began to move the couch and the rest of the furniture into the living room. I once again was forced to ignore the

pain in my wrist, which was starting to make me think that it was sprained or close to it. What made things worse was the fact that Oruki seemed to want to take advantage of the furniture being moved around to find a new set up for the living room.

"I was getting sick of the old set up anyway."

Can't we just get this over with? Who cares how your living room is set up? If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were taking advantage of my kindness.

It took about half an hour before we finally finished… and the living room was almost the same as it was before. Damn, I'm really starting to hate this guy.

I went back to my room before I could find any more reasons to want to brutally murder Oruki (Not that I could if I wanted to). I had just started to pull out my homework when my phone went off. When I looked at it, I discovered it was Koizumi.

"What's up?" I asked.

"We're finally finished with shutting down the closed space," said Koizumi, who was only barely able to hide his obvious exhaustion. "I called because I wanted to get an update on what was happening on your end."

It took him that long to shut it down? Just how close were we from having the world end?

"Haruhi's grounded until Saturday. And then her parents wanted us to have a Brigade meeting here."

"I see," said Koizumi as he pondered the new update. "I've already contacted Nagato-san and Asahina-san. They wanted us to meet together as soon as possible to discuss the recent events. And of course we wanted you there as well."

That goes without saying, doesn't it? Or are you guys having secret meetings behind my back when I wasn't looking.

"When is the earliest you can meet with us?"

"I don't think I could do it tonight without making Haruhi or her parents suspicious. I might be able to meet with you guys after school tomorrow."

"Good. I think it'll be best if we meet at that café we usually hang out at. We have a lot to discuss. Things have become very… uncertain. We need to prepare for the worst."

"Sounds good," I said, preparing to hang up the phone. "I'll see you guys then."

I then hung up the phone, sighing deeply from mental exhaustion. Why can't things be simpler, even for a week? Anyway, I wouldn't want to be Haruhi right about now. Knowing her, being cooped up in her room all day would count as torture, even if her room had a computer.

I was suddenly startled by the sound of knocking on my window. Window? Wait, that could only mean…

Sure enough, when I opened the window, Haruhi's head could be seen popping out from the side of the roof. I knew she couldn't sit still in her room. I had to admit also that seeing he head upside down with all her hair falling towards the ground was quite amusing.

"I wanted to talk to you about Saturday," she said.

"Okay, what's on your mind?"

Haruhi displayed a look of concern on her face. "I know that this meeting this Saturday would be a great way to finally get my parents to leave me alone about the club, but what are we going to do? In

the whole year we've had the club, we've only had two clients. What are the chances that we'll get another by Saturday?"

She's right. We've only had two people come to us the entire time the SOS Brigade has existed. The first was Emiri Kimidori, who was actually another human interface like Nagato. She got us to look for the missing Computer Club President when he was "captured" by some giant camel cricket… thing. And then there was Sakanaka-san, who wanted us to investigate that strange location that all the dogs in the neighborhood were afraid of. And later, she and someone else's dog were attacked by data lifeforms, making them lethargic and sickly. Thanks to the help of Nagato, though, we were able to remove the data lifeforms and place them on my cat… wait, Shamisen still has those things on him doesn't he? I hope nothing happens to him while I'm not around.

I looked at Haruhi and tried to come up with some ideas. "Maybe we can pass out flyers again. Who knows, maybe we'll get lucky and someone will come forth."

Haruhi didn't seem encouraged by the idea. "There's no way I'd find the time to do that. I have to come straight home after school for the rest of the week, remember? And even if we did, what are the chances it'll work. It didn't work before…"

It rare to see Haruhi so pessimistic. She always gets this way when she's depressed, though. I really wished I could reassure her somehow.

"We'll think of something, Haruhi. We still have three days left. Maybe something will turn up."

Haruhi nodded when I said that, still looking discouraged. Her eyes shot wide open all of a sudden and she quickly got up out of view. I then heard a knock on the door. Naru-san then opened the door and peeked her head in.

"Dinner's ready, Kyon-kun."

"Okay, thank you, Naru-san." I could hear Haruhi quickly trying to sneak back into her room while this was happening. Man, her ears must be sharp.

Dinner was a simple stew that was cooked up by Naru-san. It was American night, but I figured this kind of stew could've been served almost anywhere. Not that I'm complaining, as it was delicious as always, but perhaps Naru-san wasn't feeling as creative tonight was usual.

The rest of the night and all of school the next day was uneventful. When school was over, I explained to Haruhi that I was going to meet up with the rest of the Brigade to explain to them what had happened and what our plans for Saturday were. She didn't seem to care too much, as her melancholy was still in full swing. After we parted ways, I began to make my way towards the café, where I was sure the others were already waiting for me.

I could only begin to imagine what they we're planning…

So Haruhi's parents ar e going to meet the SOS Brigade! Who knows what'll happen when they do!

Hope you enjoyed the chapter. ^^

Chapter 12

By the time I was ready to post this fic, I have discovered that this story has become the second most reviewed Haruhi fic on . Thank you so much for your support. It's a bit overwhelming. ^^'

And some as you mentioned that there hasn't been enough of the other Brigade members in this fic, and I totally agree, especially Yuki. I have every intention of giving them some more story time from now on.

Anyway, it's time that we move on. Enjoy!

Chapter 12

It was cloudy again today. I hadn't noticed it yesterday, but was cloudy then too, wasn't it? I had almost no doubt that it was a reflection of Haruhi's mood. I had wondered as to how many more days it would be before it would be sunny again. I almost wondered if it would ever be sunny again.

Never mind. My mind is just going off on a tangent over nothing. I was just trying to keep my mind occupied while walking to the café. I was almost there now. For obvious reasons, the recent events had reached a level of seriousness great enough to require this meeting. To be honest, I was curious as to what the others had to say about the recent events.

When I finally entered the door to the café, it took a minute to locate the others. As expected, I found that all three had beaten me to the café and were sitting at a window seat. When I approached them, I noticed that Koizumi was the only one not in his school uniform. Must've taken another day off from school in order to recover from shutting down that closed space.

The moment Asahina-san saw my face, she gave an expression of horror. "Oh my goodness, Kyon-kun! Are you okay?" She got up from her seat and rushed up to me to get a closer look. "What happened to you?!"

I gave her a reassuring smile. "I'm okay, Asahina-san. It's not as bad as it looks." That was kind of a lie. It still actually hurt pretty damn bad.

Asahina-san looked at my eye carefully before sighing miserably. "I'm sorry I couldn't be there to help." She almost looked like she was going to cry.

You're overreacting, Asahina-san. There wasn't a whole lot you could have done to help, anyway. "I said I'm okay. There's no need to cry. Thank you for your concern, though."

Asahina-san swallowed hard and nodded. After that, she and I sat down next to each other. Koizumi was directly on the other side of me, and Nagato was sitting near the window.

Koizumi was to first to speak after we sat down. "Nice weather isn't it?"

I narrowed my eyes at Koizumi when he said that. No the weather was not nice. "I doubt you called this meeting so that we could just talk about the weather."

"Indeed," said Koizumi with his plastic smile. "I just thought I'd try to break the ice with a simple question. The question was ironic of course, since the weather was indeed not nice at all. In fact, it's quite depressing. I'm sure you've already suspected that the weather might be linked to Suzumiya-san's current mood.

"Yup," I said as I sat back.

"Perhaps now would be the best time for you to inform the rest of us of what has been happening with Suzumiya-san."

It was then that I began to explain to Asahina-san and Nagato as to what happened last Monday and what was going to happen this Saturday. I told them about Haruhi's parent discovering the SOS Brigade, her father banning Haruhi from going to it, the assault I received for Oruki, and the plan the Brigade has for this Saturday. Asahina-san had her hands on her mouth as I described the details of what happened Monday, making me almost feel bad for saying them. It was really cute of her to act like that.

"And that's everything."

The other three were silent for a few minutes as they took in what I had told them. Once again, Koizumi was the first to speak. "I had to admit, that hour on Monday was… exhilarating to say the least. My superiors are still in a panic about it. It took the combined efforts of the entire Organization to shut down the closed space. Even the highest members of the Organization were forced to help, which has never happened before since I first joined it. It's certainly a moment we don't want to have repeated."

I was a bit shocked to find that even the highest members of his Organization had to help. I turned to Nagato after Koizumi was done speaking. "Nagato, can you tell me how large the closed space was before it was shut down?"

"The time-space distortion known as "closed space" had successfully covered 98.7836% of the earth's surface before it had dissipated. The last digit in that decimal has been rounded up as the decimal system used by the people on this planet cannot represent the correct percentage without the number going on an unlimited number of decimal places."

My eyes bulged when I heard this. "That close?!" I was told by Koizumi that if the closed space ever covered the entire earth, the world would end and the closed space would take over.

"As I told you before," continued Koizumi. "The closed space did not stop growing after you intervened. It only slowed it down enough to

allow us a chance at shutting it down. I heard reports from members who'd entered the closed space earlier than I did. They said that the "Shinjin" inside when destroying things at a rate never before precedented. It was as if they were in a blind murderous rage. It was so bad that those who were inside could barely even kill one of them. Fortunately, by the time I got there they had calmed down to their normal raging state. One thing was sure, though. If you had delayed even a minute on your intervention, it probably would've been too late."

My heart raced a bit as all this disturbing information was relayed to me. I turned to Asahina-san to ask what she had to say. "You have anything to say, Asahina-san."

Asahina-san stared down at the table as she spoke, holding her soda close to her body. "I can't tell you too much about what had happened, as much of what we know is classified information, but I can tell you this. We have our own theory as to what would happen if the closed space would have grown to overtake our world. We believe that such an event would have resulted in a time quake so large that it would have shattered the current time plane altogether. The term we use for such an event is called a "Time Tear". We currently are unsure as to what may happen should a "Time Tear" occur, but the two competing theories are these. The time plane either continues in a new direction, forever separated from its original direction, or…" Asahina-san paused briefly, displaying obvious anxiety. "… or the time plane stops."

I blinked in confusion when she said that. "What do you mean stops?"

She looked directly at me, her eyes shining with all of her fear and concern. "It's like coming to the last page of a flipbook. There isn't another page to turn. We are forever stuck on that last page!"

You've got to be kidding me! You mean that if the closed space had taken over the planet that we would've been stuck in one instant of time forever?! It was then that the reality of my actions Monday night

truly sunk in. I really did save the universe, didn't I? From my perspective, there hadn't been anything too unusual, other than the enormous storm that came out of no where. But the true consequences of what happened that night where quite visible to these three. No doubt they were incredibly troubled, if not terrified by what was happening. I somehow realized that their positions were not enviable.

"I can't tell you anymore about our theory about "Time Tears", as that information is classified, but I'm sure that you agree that it's not a good thing."

I nodded at Asahina-san and looked to Nagato again. "Is everything that Asahina-san said true?"

"The theories on how time interacts with space are too complicated to be explained in this setting. Instead, I will say this. Through the billions of years the Data Integrated Sentient Entity has collected data, it has made the conclusion that should closed space successfully enclose this planet, it would result in an explosion of data that would quickly replace all previous data, possibly even the Data Integrated Sentient Entity itself. Even if it survived the data explosion, all data that the entity currently possesses would be rendered obsolete. The potential for discovering the secret to allowing its auto-evolution would likely be lost forever."

So I guess to conclude what she said, no matter what actually happens, allowing a closed space to envelope the world was bad. Really bad.

"Okay guys," I said. "We know what could have happened. The good thing is that it didn't happen. I think it's more important to think about the future than dwell upon the past. Including what happens this Saturday."

Koizumi nodded in agreement. "Indeed you are correct again. However, knowing what happened Monday night give us a very good idea about what to expect should things go wrong this Saturday. We

cannot doubt that this club is of an importance so great that we must protect it at all costs. If the club goes, the universe goes with it."

I knew where he was going with this. "Which means, we have to do whatever we can to convince Haruhi's father that this club is worth existing."

"Precisely," said Koizumi as he flicked his hair to the side. "Right now, he is uncertain that the club is what you told him it was. He wants proof that our club is about solving mysteries. And how do we go about doing that?"

"Simple, we need a client who has a mystery for us to solve. Haruhi and I already talked about this. The problem is that in the year that this club has existed, we've only had two clients."

"True. This of course means we'll have to give the club a client no matter what."

Is he suggesting what I think he's suggesting?

"I could go and contact Arakawa, Mori-san and the Tamaru brothers and see if we can put something together for us to try and solve come this Saturday."

"Hold it," I said while holding my hand out. "There's a big problem with this plan of yours. If you remember, the first time you gave us a little mystery to solve, Haruhi and I sniffed you guys out and exposed your attempt to fool us. The problem is that there's no guarantee that Haruhi's father will be fooled by your attempt to create a fake mystery to solve. In fact, there's a very good chance that he'll figure it out and bust us right then and there. If he does, the club is screwed." I already learned the hard way that Oruki was not easily fooled.

Koizumi sighed deeply, his plastic smile still intact. "True. We also don't have the benefit of having more time to plan ahead like we did the last couple mysteries we did. Not to mention the four of them are

as exhausted as I am. However…" Koizumi smile slowly disappeared, and his face had become more serious. "There is one more option on the table should all else fail. It was an option Nagato-san had discussed with me earlier. I think it's best if she explained it."

I turned to Nagato after that. "What is he talking about?"

Nagato was silent for a few moments before answering. "… Controlled Memory Manipulation…

"Wha… What is that?"

"Through the manipulation of data, the neural pathways in the brain can be distorted, resulting in the altering or outright removal of a person's memories."

"You mean you'd wipe the memory of the SOS Brigade from the minds of Haruhi's parents?"

"Yes."

Removing someone's memories. I can't say I like that idea… wait a minute!

"Hold on! Wouldn't we have to also remove the memories that Haruhi has about her parent finding out as well?"

"Yes."

Now the idea of messing with people's minds really bothered me. The thought of Oruki head being altered didn't bother me much, but the thought of screwing with the minds of Haruhi and Naru-san made me feel a little sick to my stomach.

"Don't you think the idea of messing with Haruhi's memories is… wrong? Doesn't that bother you at all?"

Koizumi put his head on his hand, his face still serious. "We've all known and been through enough with Suzumiya-san that we can

safely say that we are close friends with her, but we have to look at the big picture here. The universe must be preserved at all costs, regardless of the moral implications of the actions needed to preserve it." He then sighed a bit and smiled again. "But in the end, even wiping out their memories is not a perfect solution. It's really only a band-aid fix. There would be little to prevent Suzumiya-san's parents from making the same discovery again and having the whole mess repeat itself. We could try harder in order to prevent them from finding out, but the risk would always be there."

"There has to be a better solution," I said.

"Do you have any suggestions?"

I had to think for a little bit before I answered. "Why can't we tell her parents the truth?"

"We can't do that."

"Why the hell not! If they knew the truth, they'd know that they would have to let Haruhi continue with her Brigade regardless of what happens on Saturday. We could prevent her parents from ever upsetting her again. Especially her father."

"There are many in the Organization who advocate for that exact action, but as of right now, the majority of the highest ranking members of the Organization do not believe that the benefits of taking that action would outweigh the risk it also gives. They believe that if Suzumiya-san's parents discover the truth, the likelihood of Suzumiya-san also discovering the truth rises to dangerously high levels."

I looked at Nagato for her opinion. "Does your boss agree?"

"The Entity has calculated that revealing key information to Suzumiya-san's parental figures regarding her abilities would increase the probability of Suzumiya-san discovering her abilities by 428%. It has determined that risk to be unacceptably high."

Great, no help from Nagato then. I then turned to Asahina-san. "What do you think?"

"As you may know, we time travelers strive to ensure that the flow of time does not ever become disrupted. All events must happen as history in our time said they happened. All I can say is that it's imperative that at the present time that Suzumiya-san's parents do not learn the truth about their daughter's powers or our identities as well. I'm sorry, but any other information on the matter is classified."

So I guess that blows my idea out of the water. I looked at Nagato again. "This memory wiping… have you done it before?"

"I have not, but other human interfaces have done so in order to protect themselves or to prevent the discovery of our existence by those whom the Entity has determined should not know."

"Are there any weird or harmful side affects to it?"

"As long as the procedure is done correctly, no."

Correctly, huh? I sighed and buried my head in my hands. I guess that the plan was going to be this: Koizumi would get together with his Organization buddies and try a put together a fake mystery to present on Saturday. Should that not work, Nagato would be forced to wipe the memories of Haruhi and her parents to prevent Haruhi from creating another world ending closed space. Even though I knew that we would have to do this, it still bothered the hell out of me.

"There is one other important factor we must consider," said Koizumi. "And that factor is Suzumiya-san herself. As you may realize, it's certain that she will want a client to appear, no matter what. It should come to no surprise that a client would appear, if Suzumiya-san subconsciously creates one. We should be prepared for that possibility as well."

"That has its own set of problems too, though," I said. "If we get handed a real mystery to solve, there's a chance we won't be able to solve it. If that happens, the club might be doomed anyway."

"True, but at least if that happened, we wouldn't have to do anything but act naturally and try to solve it. I actually look forward to the idea of solving a real mystery."

I guess solving a real mystery could be fun. And with Haruhi, Koizumi and Nagato on our side, the chances are pretty damn good that we'd figure it out. Unfortunately, we still don't know if we'll have a real mystery.

"I think that it's best to remain cautiously optimistic about this upcoming Saturday," said Koizumi. "Who knows, it might end up being a very fun experience, and then we can rest easy knowing that the club and the universe are safe and sound. I will of course make preparations on my end in order to try and have something ready in case we don't have any real clients. It won't be easy, but I'll do my best."

I guess the rest of us can do nothing but wait until Saturday comes.

We all finished our drinks and left shortly after that. We came to our usual meeting place and parted ways, but before I went back to Haruhi's place, I called out to Nagato.

"Hey, Nagato! Wait!"

Nagato turned to face me after I called to her. "What?"

I rushed up to her and nervously made a request. "Uh… could you do me a favor? You see, these bruises and the black eyes are pretty unsightly and they hurt like hell. Do you think maybe you could help me with that? I'd really appreciate it."

Nagato nodded and began to lift her hand. I had to stop her, though.

"Wait, don't heal me completely! If you did that, Haruhi and everyone else might get suspicious as to why I was suddenly healed so quickly. Could you… maybe make it so that I healed faster, without it being too fast?"

Nagato nodded and held out her hand. "Your arm…"

Understanding what she was asking for, I gave my right arm to her. She then leaned over and gently bit it. Once again, it didn't really hurt. It was more like how a mosquito bite was painless before it started to itch. When she was done, I watched as the two puncture marks she made quickly disappeared. I didn't feel any different, though.

"What did you do to me?"

"Time release nano-machines," she said. "They will speed up your natural healing factor by five times."

I smiled when I heard this. "Pretty cool. How long will this last?"

"The nano-machines will deactivate as soon as you are fully healed."

"Oh…" I was a bit disappointed to hear that I wasn't going to receive permanent fast healing. "Thank you very much, Nagato."

She nodded after I said that, but before I could turn around to leave, she surprised me with a question. "Have you read it?"

I blinked in confusion. "Read what?"

"The book…"

I suddenly realized what she was talking about. She was referring to the book of Haikus she gave me. A huge pang of guilt overtook me when I remembered. "I'm sorry, Nagato. With all the crazy things that had been happening over the last week and a half, I haven't really had a chance to read it." It was kind of a lie, since there were a few opportunities for me to read it that I didn't take advantage of.

It was subtle, but Nagato appeared to be disappointed when I said that. Oh man, now I really feel bad.

"I promise I'll read it tonight. Okay, Nagato?"

She nodded and began to turn around to go home. I decided to do the same.

The rest of the night could easily be summarized as uneventful. When I returned, Oruki questioned me as to where I was. I simply told him that I was meeting with the other members of the club to tell them what was happening. After that, I was excused. He told me he didn't have anything for me to do. I ended up spending most of my time in my room. I did actually start to read the book of haikus, so I couldn't say to myself that I was a liar. I got maybe 25 pages in before I put it down.

Dinner was awkward as well. It'd become an even quieter affair than before, since Haruhi's appetite had shrunk considerably. She took only small bites of her food and didn't even finish her plate. For the first time since I'd known her, I actually out ate her. Maybe it would be best if Haruhi and her parents forgot about this whole ordeal.

So now it's the next morning, and I was awake, feeling quite refreshed. Why? To be honest, I wasn't quite sure, either. I looked at the clock and saw it was half an hour before Haruhi usually got up to find some tortuous way to wake me up. When I sat up from my bed, I was pleasantly surprised to find that I barely felt any pain at all, including my wrist. I then realized that this must've been the work of Nagato's nano-machines. They must've sped up the recuperation time for sleep as well. Nagato, you are amazing. Man I wish this was permanent.

The first thing I did was go to the bathroom and look in the mirror. As I had expected, my eye had cleared up considerably, and the puffiness in my cheek was gone altogether. I poked my eye a bit to test it. It was still a little tender, but considerably better than it was

yesterday. After I had finished my investigation, I went and took a shower.

When I had finished my shower, I wrapped myself in a towel and began to leave the bathroom. As my luck would have it (or lack thereof) Haruhi had been walking by the bathroom door, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. When she noticed me leaving, she shrieked briefly and threw a kick towards my groin. Due to my incredibly well rested state, however, I was just barely able to react to the kick by turning my hips. The kick landed on the side of my leg instead, preventing what would have an enormously painful blow to my family jewels. It still hurt, though.

"Ow, what the hell?!"

After Haruhi got a better look at me, she spoke. "You scared the heck out of me! You're never up this early!"

I sighed and shook my head a bit. I guess I could see how someone who was only just waking up would be freaked out by a guy suddenly coming out of the bathroom in only a towel, especially if it was unexpected. I scratched the back of my head and laughed lightly.

"I guess I was feeling optimistic or something. I don't know why, but I just woke up early today."

Haruhi narrowed her eyes a bit and pointed her finger at my nose. "Why can't you ever be like that for our Brigade meetings during the weekends…?" It was then that I could see Haruhi's melancholy suddenly rush back when she was reminded of the Brigade. She stood there of a minute, absorbed in sadness while staring down at the floor. Eventually, the both of us were reminded of the fact that I was still standing at the door to the bathroom in nothing but a towel.

Haruhi blushed lightly before giving me a scowl. "Idiot! Don't just stand there like that! Get dressed!" She quickly yanked me by my hair and pushed me into my room. That hurt, dammit! Did she really need to do that?

Haruhi proceeded with her own shower while I got dressed. I made my way downstairs and went into the kitchen. I figured that since I was technically ready to go that I'd take a crack at making breakfast and lunch. I already knew that I wasn't half as talented at cooking as Haruhi or her mother, but I figured that as long as I didn't burn everything it would be fine. A simple western breakfast of eggs, bacon and toast was well within my capabilities, I figured. It would sure as hell beat that instant microwaveable stuff.

I had finished preparing breakfast just as Haruhi was finished getting ready for school. She was pleasantly surprised to see that I had made breakfast for a change, and she grabbed the plate I handed her and began to chow down. She didn't say anything, so I figured it must have been at least edible. Just as I was about to take my plate, Naru-san entered the kitchen, cutely wiping the sleep from her eyes.

"Oh, Kyon-kun is making breakfast for us, huh? Wonderful!"

I gave Naru-san the sweetest smile I could muster. "Y… yep. I was doing just that!" I then handed her what was going to be my plate. I was originally only going to make breakfast for Haruhi and myself, but since Naru-san had entered the kitchen, I knew it would be rude not to serve her, too. Now that I think about it, Oruki was probably up now too. I'll probably have to make him breakfast as well.

Sure enough, Oruki entered the kitchen shortly after I handed Naru-san her plate, newspaper in hand. He looked to me after I started making his and my plates. "Make them scrambled." Not so much as a hello, I see. What, do you just figure that I don't deserve one anymore?

I smiled at him, doing whatever I could to hold back my displeasure. "Coming right up."

Due to the fact that I had to make breakfast for Haruhi's parents as well, I never really got the chance to enjoy my breakfast. I had to shovel it down my throat as fast as I could before Haruhi whisked me

away for another wonderful day of school. When the two of us finally made it to out class, Haruhi once again buried her head in her desk.

I had hoped that Haruhi would have felt a little better today, but I was wrong. I once again talked to her, if only to console her a bit. "You alright?"

Haruhi didn't bother to answer me, which got me really worried. I kept talking. "Koizumi said he was going to talk with Arakawa-san, Mori-san and the Tamaru Brothers to see if they can help like they did during our summer and winter getaways."

Haruhi raised her head ever so slightly, allowing me to barely see her eyes. "It won't work." After staying silent for a minute, she spoke again. "There's no way that my Dad won't see through whatever they're going to try. They're going to screw up. I know it. And then my Brigade is gone forever."

"Well, there's still always the off chance that someone might come forward with a real mystery."

"Even if that were to happen, I can't help but worry that we might fail at solving it. What then? Maybe my dad might let us off the hook if he thinks we genuinely tried, but there's no way to know for sure."

"With yourself, Nagato and Koizumi, how could you not solve it?"

Haruhi sat up a bit and started playing with her mechanical pencil. "I don't doubt the abilities of my Brigade members. Not one bit. They're all incredible people. They wouldn't be in my Brigade if they weren't. But they're only human. Even they have their limits."

Yeah, about the "only human" part… heh… And did she just say everybody was incredible? Did that include me?

Haruhi eventually grew tired of fiddling with her pencil and put it down. She then buried her head in her arms once more. Apparently I

was failing at cheering her up, but I tried to say one more thing before giving up.

"Don't give up, Haruhi. It's not like you to be like this. We need your leadership come Saturday. We'll get through this. I'm sure of it."

For some reason, I felt compelled to grab her hand. And for some stranger reason, I complied with that desire. I held on to her hand and gave it a light squeeze. She didn't squeeze back, but she didn't pull away either. Sensing no sign from her that she wanted me to remove my hand, I kept it there, enjoying the warm softness. I knew that a few classmates were going to see what I was doing, including Taniguchi and Kunikida, and I didn't care. I'll just ignore any snarky comments they make during lunch. I didn't let go of her hand until Okabe-sensei entered the room.

Why did I do that? Why did I hold her hand?

School came and went as usual, and before I knew it, I was working on my homework in the living room. Normally I would have put it off until later, but Haruhi insisted I not put it off, and since her parents heard her talk to me about, I felt obligated to work on it now. I did what I could to stave off boredom while doing it. I could hear the sounds of a buzz saw going off in the background. Oruki was wood working again, and the sounds he was making down there were annoying. Really, really annoying.

But then there was another noise that I heard coming from the basement. "OOOOOWWWW!"

Startled by his cry of pain, I instinctually got up and headed down into the basement to investigate. I saw him running his hand through some water in the sink that was down there. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he said in a tone that tried to make this appear as no big deal. "I just nicked my hand while using the saw."

I went up to the sink to take a look at his injury. I could see the blood from his hand mixing with the water that was splashing on it. I wasn't able to make out what the wound looked like because of the water, but it looked pretty bad.

"Do you want me to grab some bandages upstairs?"

"I got it," he said while opening a cabinet with his other hand. He then pulled out some hydrogen peroxide and some large bandages. "When you work with knives, saws and sanders, it helps to prepare for the worst."

He then pulled his hand out of the running water. I was able to see a small gash on the side of his hand. It wasn't terribly deep, but it still looked painful as hell. He then began to clean and dress the wound, doing it in a fashion that seemed to indicate that this wasn't his first time. When he was finished, he stared at his wound and shook his head.

"It never fails…"

"Huh?" I said, looking for clarification.

"I was just talking about this weird pattern I'd noticed. It seems that every time my daughter is mad at me, I always find a way to hurt myself. It's like karma's trying to bite me in the ass or something. It's weird. It just… never fails…" She then gave a mild smirk while looking at his hand once more.

I smiled as well when I heard this, but for very different reasons from Oruki. If only he knew. I was sure that this was no coincidence.

Oruki then looked at me once more. "You're not doing anything right now, right?"

"I was doing my homework."

"You can finish that later," Oruki said as he motioned me towards his work bench. "I need a hand with something. It going to be harder to work on this with my hand the way it is."

I reluctantly agreed and followed to the work bench that he was using. He pulled out a measuring tape and held it out to me. "Hold onto the end of that."

I complied, holding onto the end of the tape while he pulled on it. He then put it down against a piece of wood. He then grabbed a mechanical pencil and began to mark on the wood where he expected to cut. He then took the wood and began to cut it with the saw. We repeated this step a few more times before he was finally done cutting.

I became curious as to what he was building. "What are you making?"

"A dog house," he said without hesitation.

I was a bit surprised. "Are you getting a dog?"

Oruki stared at the ground, his face looking a bit regretful. "We can't afford a dog, right now." He then narrowed his eyes at me. "We can barely afford to have you around. When are you going to give us the rent anyway?"

"Oh," I said. I had actually forgotten that I still hadn't paid them. "I could give it to you now."

"I wasn't going to make a big deal about until you found a place to live. I do expect you to give it to me eventually. In the mean time, I'll sell this thing when I'm done with it."

I began to wonder just how tight expenses were starting to get for the Suzumiyas. Now that I think about it, I hadn't seen Oruki going out to work all that often since I moved here. I had wanted to ask about it, but I got the feeling that I shouldn't. He would probably tell

me it wasn't my business anyway. Instead, I tried to change the subject.

"Hey Oruki… let's just say, hypothetically, that your daughter didn't have an extracurricular club and wanted to spend her free time hanging out with friends and having fun… would you be okay with that?"

"Absolutely not," said Oruki without even the slightest pause. He then looked at me suspiciously. "Are you trying to tell me something?"

I shook my head nervously. "N… no. I was just curious. Can I ask why?"

Oruki put his pencil down before answering. "Because it would be such a waste!" He then rubbed his forehead before continuing. "I mean, I'm sure you know by now just how talented she is. It's incredible! Do you have any idea how incredibly rare it is for someone to be able to do almost anything well? A person could consider themselves lucky if they were so talented in only one thing. But her, she could be almost anything she wants to be when she grows up! Can you imagine having that kind of gift?"

I think I understood what he was saying.

Oruki continued on his rant. "I knew ever since she was little that she was amazing. She's brilliant! I knew then that I would do whatever it took to make sure she didn't throw it all away. So I forced her into doing lots of things, like karate lessons, sports, piano lessons, anything I could think of. I had hoped that one of those things would catch her interest, and she'd stick to it, but she didn't seem to care about any of it. She just wanted to do stupid things like paint things on our walls and vandalize people's property. It was so frustrating. The more she acted out, the more I pushed her, and thus she would act out even more."

I could see the frustration on his face as he looked back at some of the event he must've had with his daughter. I decided to ask him another question. "Weren't you afraid you were pushing her too hard?"

"I was afraid that I might be by the time she reached high school, so I made a deal with her. I'd leave her alone as long as she picked an extracurricular activity. Whatever it was, it didn't matter, as long as it was constructive. Her grades have always been great, so that was really the only thing that concerned me, other then the fact that I wished she didn't pick North High as her high school. No offense, but I'd wanted her to go to Kouyouen. She kept insisting that she go to North High, though. I couldn't figure it out of the life of me."

I knew why. It was because of the things I told Haruhi four years ago when I went back in time. I wasn't going to tell him that, though. I don't even want to imagine what he'd do if he knew I was the one who actually defaced the field at her middle school.

"Are you worried that she might hate you after all that's happened?"

Oruki was silent, as if he didn't want to answer the question, or didn't have an answer. Eventually, he gave me a response. "It doesn't matter how she feels about me in the end. What matters to me is that she's ready for the real world when she's an adult and that she's successful at whatever she chooses to do in life. If that means she has to hate me… then so be it." I then noticed that he looked almost regretful. I had wondered if maybe he'd wished he could try again at being a father for Haruhi. Nobody gets second chances with raising children. If you screw up, then you're essentially responsible for ruining someone's life. I have little idea what it was like to be a parent, but I know that for now I wouldn't want to experience it. And I definitely wouldn't want to be Haruhi's parent.

By the way, none of this meant that I was actually starting to like Oruki. It just made me realize that he might actually be human after all.

Oruki gave me a very serious look after that. "You know, my wife's pretty damn excited about Saturday. She won't shut up about it. She better not be disappointed."

"I understand," I said, swallowing hard. "I'm… pretty excited too."

"By the way," said Oruki, appearing to change the subject. "How the hell is it that your eye cleared up so fast?"

I blinked in surprise when he asked that. I'd completely forgotten that I was healing super fast thanks to Nagato and that my eye was quickly fading. Almost too quickly in fact. I simply scratched a back of my head and smiled. "I guess I just heal fast."

Oruki looked suspiciously at me for a moment before dropping it. He then positioned the boards where they needed to go and grabbed a nail. "Hold this still while I hammer it in."

I widened my eyes slightly in fear. "Why do I have to?"

Oruki pointed to his bandaged hand. "I can't hold onto it right with my hand like this. I need you to do it. Relax, I'm not going to hurt you."

You know, that hand of yours makes me think twice about that. I'd hate to be the next person to need bandages.

I eventually gave in and held the nail for him. I cringed a bit in anticipation of the tremendous pain that I was afraid would come next. My only comfort was knowing that the nano-machines that were still inside me. Nagato said they'd only deactivate if my body was free of injuries, so if my fingers were smashed, the nano-machines would have to stick around until they were fixed. At least I knew it wouldn't hurt for long.

Thankfully, only the nail itself was hit by the force of the hammer. I moved my hand after the nail was set into the wood and let him finish hammering it in. We did this several more times before Oruki

finally decided to call it a day. I was very relieved to have my fingers intact.

Afterwards, I left the basement and went up to my room. I decided to pick up the book Nagato gave me and start reading it some more. However, I wasn't able to finish a page before a knock was heard from the window. Must be Haruhi again.

When I opened the window, I was pleasantly surprised to see that Haruhi was… smiling. For the first time since Monday in fact.

"I've got great news! We've got a client!"

I blinked in surprise when I heard this. I couldn't believe it. We really had a client! It couldn't have been a coincidence. It was almost certain that Haruhi had something to do with it.

"Who is it?"

"Guess."

How the hell am I supposed to guess? It could be anyone of nearly seven billion people, most of whom I don't know the names of.

I figured it must have been someone we knew if I had to guess. "Sakanaka-san?"

"Nope."

"Kimidori-san?"

"Wrong."

"Taniguchi?"

Haruhi narrowed her eyes at this point as if she was disappointed I hadn't guessed right yet. "No."

I was starting to become stumped. "Kunikida? The Computer Club President?"

Haruhi looked genuinely annoyed now. "No. No! Come on, Kyon!"

I sighed in defeat. "I give up… Just tell me."

Haruhi groaned before telling me. "Kiyosumi Morimura!"

I raised an eyebrow when she said the name. "Who the hell is that?"

"Don't you remember him? He was one of our sponsors for our movie."

Doesn't ring a bell… let me think. Morimura… Morimura… Wait! I remember now. He was that heavy-set guy who owned that grocery store downtown, wasn't he? He was even in our movie for a brief scene too if I remember correctly… Hold on, how the hell was I supposed to guess him?

"Too bad! You failed to guess. However, since I'm feeling generous, I'll give you a point for trying."

Oh boy! A whole point! Now Koizumi's point lead on me is only a mere 19,999. He better be careful, or I'll over take him for sure.

"Back on topic," I said. "Did he tell you what was going on?"

Haruhi shook her head. "No, but he seemed really distressed. He said that he had no one else to turn to. It must be a pretty desperate situation for him."

Yeah, one would have to be pretty damn desperate to turn to the SOS Brigade for help… and probably a bit crazy, too.

"I told him that we couldn't meet with him until Saturday. He seemed pretty upset that it couldn't be sooner, but I told him we had prior engagements. I told him to meet us here on Saturday and even gave him directions."

"So we're good to go, then?"

Haruhi nodded. "As long as he shows up."

I gave her a smile, feeling much relieved myself. "See? I told you things would work out."

Haruhi took a deep breath, looking very anxious. "Now we just have to solve it." After that, Haruhi began to get up. "I'm going back to my room. I want to make sure we're as prepared as possible."

"See ya," I said as I closed the window. However, before I could lie back down, I heard a knock on the window again. I got up again and opened it once more.

"By the way, did you finish your homework?"

My eyes widened a bit when I realized I forgot about it when I went into the basement to help Oruki. "Oops."

"Dammit, Kyon! Stop procrastinating! You're so lucky that I'm stuck in my room for now, or I'd give you the biggest penalty you could imagine!"

How are you stuck in your room? You're up on the roof right now.

"Just shut up and do it!" yelled Haruhi before finally getting up and going back to her room.

I sighed in exasperation before closing the window and heading to the living room. Oruki was already in there watching TV while drinking a beer. He saw me sitting at the coffee table where I had left my homework. "Forget something?"

I ignored his smartass remark and went back to finishing my homework. Oh well, at least Haruhi seemed to be back to her old self again. Let's hope that she can stay that way come Saturday.

I was able to finish my homework just in time before dinner. During it, Haruhi did the honors of telling her parents that they had a client set up for Saturday. Oruki merely nodded, but Naru-san oozed with excitement. Man, she's bound to be disappointed if she's hyping herself this much. She needs to get out of the house more… then again, the rest of the world might not appreciate having Naru-san running loose out in the world. She'd be almost as bad as Haruhi, if not worse.

After finishing dinner and cleaning up, I went back to my room. Just as I was about to relax, my phone rung. I sighed as I reached for it, thinking it must have been Koizumi again. When I looked at the phone to see who it was, I was surprised to see that it was Asahina-san instead. What could she want? You know, hearing her sweet voice would really hit the spot right about now. I answered the phone gleefully. "Hi, Asahina-san! How're you?"

"Um… Kyon-kun. I have some things I need to inform you about." Her voice didn't sound happy or cheerful. Something bad must be happening.

"What's wrong Asahina-san?"

She paused briefly before she told me what was bothering her. "I can't tell you much, but there was some kind of time anomaly that occurred last Friday."

"Really? Why didn't you tell me about it at the meeting yesterday?"

"Well, that's the thing… you see, we didn't know about it until a few hours ago."

"We" must be referring to her faction of Time-travelers. "How could you not have known about it until a few hours ago if it happened on Friday?"

"I'm… not sure how to say this but… it didn't exist until a few hours ago…"

Now I was really confused. "How can something that existed last Friday not exist until a few hours ago?"

"It's really hard to explain without revealing classified information. It has to do with Suzumiya-san, though."

Well of course it does. Does anything strange ever happen without her being involved in some way, shape or form?

I thought about what she said for a bit. It took some doing, but I eventually got an idea as to what she was talking about. "So, you're saying that the Haruhi of a few hours ago altered time and events on last Friday?"

"That's close enough. Yes."

"What did she do?"

"I can't tell you as it's classified information. However, soon enough Itsuki-kun and Nagato-san will explain it to you better than I could."

"Soon, huh? Like Saturday soon?"

"That's classified…"

Figures. I have a feeling that it'll have something to do with what happens on Saturday… Great.

"By the way," I said. "Haruhi got us a client on Saturday. Does this… anomaly stuff have anything to do with him?"

"That's classified…"

Of course. As sweet as Asahina-san is, it sure bugs me that she rarely can give me a straight answer about stuff. At least Koizumi and Nagato gave out answers easily enough.

"I'm sorry, Kyon-kun. I can't tell you much more. The only thing else I can tell you is that when you do confront this anomaly, you're likely to

be in great danger."

Danger? Well that's always a good thing. Especially when it's "great danger".

I sighed deeply before ending my conversation with Asahina-san. "Thank you for informing me. I'll try to be careful."

"Okay, Kyon-kun. I'll see you Saturday, okay?"

"Okay. Bye Asahina-san." I then hung up the phone and facepalmed. She didn't say for sure, but I could assume that a few hours ago, Haruhi altered events for last Friday in a way that affected Morimura-san. How nice of Haruhi to do such a thing to one of her sponsors… Well, whatever happened, it was bad enough that he needed our help to confront it. So I'm guessing that Saturday we'll find out what it's about with the help of Koizumi and Nagato. Unfortunately, if danger is involved, we'll have to deal with making sure Haruhi and her parents are as far away from it as possible. Sounds like a pain. I should have figured that we weren't going to have an ordinary mystery to try and solve.

It was then that my phone went off again. Looking at it, I was surprised to find that it was… Haruhi? Why the hell is she calling me when she right in the next room? Can't she just climb onto the roof again to talk to me? "Hello?"

"Who were you talking to?"

Crap! I totally forgot that the walls between our rooms were really thin, and it was easy to hear what the other person was talking about on the other side. Was she eavesdropping on my conversation with Asahina-san? Oh no, what if she heard too much?

I tried to play it off as coolly as I could. "I was talking to Koizumi."

"Liar! I heard you! You were talking to Mikuru!"

If you already knew I was talking to her, why did ask who I was talking to?

"What were you two talking about?! I heard my name mentioned! I demand answers!"

I was really becoming nervous. How much did she hear? I really hoped she didn't hear everything. "She… was asking for my opinion on a question. She needed a guy's opinion."

"And what does it have to do with me?"

"It's nothing, Haruhi. She asked something about you, yes, but it wasn't a big deal."

"I want to know. As your Brigade Chief, I order you to tell me?!"

"No, Haruhi. I won't. It was a personal question. I promise you it wasn't a big deal."

"Violation of a direct order is grounds for treason, Kyon! Do you hear me?"

I rubbed my faced in annoyance. I guess I'd have to humor her. "She… wanted to know who I thought looked better… in the bunny costumes…" Was that the best I could do? Oh man that was lame.

"And what did you say?"

"I told her I didn't know."

"You're lying! Tell me the truth!"

"Goodnight Haruhi…" I then hung up the phone. I soon heard banging on my wall followed by a surprising audible "Damn you, Kyon! Answer me now!"

I put my pillow over my head to drown her out. I really didn't want to answer the question. Besides that, I was glad she didn't hear what I

actually said to Asahina-san. That was a pretty bad slip up on my part. I'd hoped that Haruhi didn't create a closed space over such a stupid question, but if she did, I at least knew Koizumi wouldn't have to worry anymore about wasting time that he needed making up a fake mystery. Eventually, I took the pillow off my head since Haruhi had stopped making a racket. I got dressed in my pajamas and lied back down. I pulled sheets over myself and fell asleep.

Saturday was going to be one hell of a day…

Whew… Hell of a chapter, even if it was another setup chapter. I hope you guys got enough of a dosage of Mikuru, Nagato and Koizumi from that one. There'll be more in upcoming chapters.

I also wanted to say that it seemed that a lot of you started to really hate Oruki. Granted, you were hating him in a good way, but I still wanted to remind the readers that he was still a human being. A flawed human being, but a human being nevertheless. I had to at least try and make him relatable again.

Anyway, I promise you it shouldn't take too long before I finish the next chapter. I know you're waiting for it eagerly. I can't wait to write it!

Chapter 13

Okay, so you must thinking, "Finally, it's here!" Well, I'm currently thinking "Finally, it's done!" Anyway, we'll finally find out what's going to happen Saturday. I hope you enjoy the chapter. I've wanted to do this one for quite a while.

BTW, the music monster referred to in this chapter comes from the drama CD, Sound Around . I recommend that you listen to it. You can find a translation of it on YouTube.

Chapter 13

Okay, you're probably wondering where the hell we are right now. Actually, it's likely impossible that you've been wondering that, as you'd only just found out that we're anywhere. What's more likely, however, is that you're wondering who I was referring to when I said "we".

To answer that first, I'm currently standing next Koizumi and Nagato. And as for the question of where we were… that was a little harder to explain. Was it closed space? Well according to Koizumi and Nagato, no. At least, this place didn't remind me of any closed space I had seen before.

I guess if I had to describe it, I would say that it's the storeroom to the grocery store… except it's not. I don't know; it was weird. Everything in it had a bluish tint to it, including myself, Koizumi and Nagato. And it was all fuzzy, like looking at a poorly taken photograph. I had briefly looked at my hands. They were so blurry that I couldn't make out the lines and bumps on my palms, but if I touched my hand I could feel them. Nagato and Koizumi were equally blurry to me as well.

Anyway, none of this is important because, unfortunately for us, we were not alone. On the other side of the room we were in, there was the anomaly Asahina-san had told me about the other night. And it looked every bit as dangerous as her warning had foretold.

What exactly was the anomaly? Well, it's going to be a pain to describe, but I'll try. I guess the words that summarize it best would be a tentacle beast, but that would likely give you the wrong idea. It wasn't one of **those** tentacle beasts. There was more to it than that. It had numerous red eyes that floated about inside its body, some of which would move up and down its tentacles. The dark slits in each of them dilated and shrunk in an almost pulsating fashion. It also had countless mouths, each of which would also move randomly around its body. Some were attached to the ends of the tentacles. All of them had sharp, pointed teeth. There was one mouth in particular, though, that stood out the most. It was the largest one, and it was directly in the middle of the monstrosity. Unlike the other mouths, this one seemed to extend out, as if it had a pair jaws. It had no tongue, strangely enough. It did however have a row of sharp, jagged teeth on the top and bottom, chaotically arranged in a way only something as disgusting as this thing would have. In no way, shape or form did this thing even come close to anything from normal reality. Strangely, it was the one thing within this space that wasn't blurry.

"Think it certainly fits in with the kinds of thoughts Suzumiya-san san must've had when she created this thing," said Koizumi. "It truly is a creature of pure chaos."

Chaos, definitely describes this… thing in every imaginable way.

"Suzumiya-san must've put all of her negative, chaotic thoughts into the form of this entity and sent it over a week ago to this location. Perhaps, subconsciously, she thought it would be better contained within the confines of this space rather than inside her mind where it continued to wreak havoc in her psyche."

What else could we expect from Haruhi? Everything she creates or is otherwise involved with is some kind of horrible, nightmarish

creature. First, there were the blue giants that wrecked closed space. Then we have the camel cricket thing that Haruhi helped accidentally wake up from hibernation. Then there was the giant music monster that was making us have that stupid song she created stuck in our heads. And now, this thing…

Why can't Haruhi ever create something cute, fuzzy, and cuddly for a change? Sure, I know it's not her style, but just once I'd like to meet up with one of her creations and not feel like my life was in imminent doom.

"So… all we got to do is kill this thing and we're done, right?" I asked, definitely losing a bit of my nerve.

"Yes…" responded Nagato.

"Very well," said Koizumi. "I suppose it's time that we got this over with. It would be nice to have this whole mess we've been through come to an end." He then created one of those reddish balls of energy that he seems able to weald in these places. "I could access enough of my powers here to transform, but doing so would be very inefficient."

"Just kill it already!" I yelled as I began to back off a bit behind the both of them. The two of them were the picture of complete calmness during this whole event.

In the back of my mind I had to think, however. Why couldn't this have been a normal mystery?

To explain what I meant about that, I'd have to back track to the beginning of today. To my very fortune, I was once again able to wake up again without the "assistance" of Haruhi. I quickly got up and made my way into the bathroom. I looked into the mirror once again to check the progress of my healing. When I discovered that my black eye and bruises were completely gone, I couldn't help but have mixed feelings about it. Sure, it was great to look normal, but

the ability to feel so damn refreshed in the morning was definitely something I was going to miss. Good bye, nano-machines. You've done your job well.

After taking my shower, I exited the bathroom and quickly got dressed. I tried to find something close to professional to wear, but when I remembered that we were nothing more than a high school "club", I realized that it was probably best not to overdo it. I settled on a yellow shirt with short, blue sleeves and a pair of blue jeans.

When I exited my room, I found Haruhi just getting out of her room. I noticed she had very slight bags underneath her eyes as she yawned while heading towards me.

"Good morning, Haruhi. How are you feeling?"

"Anxious," she said while rubbing out the sleep from her eyes. "I barely slept at all last night."

"That's too bad."

She narrowed her eyes at me when she realized I was already set to go. "Obviously you don't seem all that worried. Looks like you slept like a baby."

Oh I was worried all right. I was up most of the night too, but thanks to Nagato, I didn't need a full night's sleep to be rested.

Haruhi pointed a finger directly at my face. "I mean it when I say that I want you to take this one hundred percent seriously. You should behave like your life depends on solving this mystery."

The sad thing is that it literally does. Even if it doesn't look like it, I had planned to take this very seriously.

Haruhi took a deep breath and walked past me. Just before she entered, though, she looked back at me one last time. "Oh, and Kyon. I want you to wear your armband during this meeting. I

ordered all my Brigade members to wear them while we try to solve this mystery."

"Sure thing." As ridiculous as the armbands were, I guess I was okay with wearing mine if everyone else had to as well.

So now, every one of the members of the SOS Brigade had finally arrived. Haruhi had decided to have the kotatsu set up in the living room during the meeting (Which meant that I had to be the one to carry it in there). Haruhi sat at the end of it, as expected. Koizumi and I sat on one side and Asahina-san and Nagato sat on the other. Everyone was wearing their own armbands, even Nagato, whom Haruhi had just made an armband for today. Down the line we had Haruhi the Supersleuth, Koizumi the Vice-Chief, Asahina-san the Deputy Vice-Chief, myself as Brigade Member #1, and Nagato as Brigade Member #2. There was one other thing I had to mention. Koizumi had arrived wearing an extremely formal suit to the occasion. Dammit, he's such a kiss ass. It really pisses me off.

Oh and there was one other person sitting with us as well. And that was Naru-san. She sat next to Asahina-san and near Haruhi. While sitting near the kotatsu, I could see her fidgeting with excitement. It looked like she could barely contain herself. If it were possible for people to spontaneously explode, I would have been running from her for sure.

Haruhi was a bit uncomfortable with her mother sitting with the rest of Brigade. "Uh… mom?"

"Yes?" spoke Naru-san, responding within a millisecond after Haruhi spoke. Her innocent smile was a clear indicator that she was unaware that she was kind of out of place sitting with us.

Haruhi stared at her mother for a second before sighing in exasperation. "Never mind…" Perhaps she didn't want to ruin everything by upsetting her mother, or maybe she just didn't have the heart to break up her mother's enthusiasm.

And enthusiasm was definitely something Naru-san had a lot of. "I can't wait for this meeting to start! I hope this turns out like one of those detective mystery novels! Maybe we'll solve a burglary or a murder! Oh, and I want one of those armbands! Can I have one? Can I have one?!"

No, Naru-san. Burglaries and murders are things best left to the police. And we've already had two fake murder mysteries that we've solved. I'd rather not have to do another one. And I highly doubt Haruhi is going to give you an armband.

Naru-san then turned towards Asahina-san. "And just look at her! She's adorable!" Naru-san then went and grabbed Asahina-san and gave her a huge hug. "She's cute and sweet and soft and huggable!" She then began to shake Asahina-san back and forth, causing Asahina-san to whimper nervously, obviously not the type that likes being touched by people she didn't know. Nevertheless, staring at the two of them like this… it's… too much moe, too much moe, too much moe, too much moe, too much… !

I felt a foot suddenly hit my leg, and I was forced to regain my train of thought. I looked at Haruhi, who was giving me a nasty scowl.

Naru-san eventually released Asahina-san and turned to Koizumi. "And look at you. You're so charming and handsome!"

"Well, thank you very much, Naru-san," said Koizumi while rubbing the back of his head modestly. "I must say that I find you equally charming and beautiful, as well."

Naru-san giggled from the praise she received. She then leaned forward to get a look at Nagato. "And even she is a cutie. So quiet and mysterious. Oh wow, I had no idea everyone in your club was so handsome and pretty!"

Everybody? Does everybody include me?

I felt another kick to my shins. "Ow, what the hell?"

"Quit day dreaming, Kyon!" yelled Haruhi with a finger in my face. "We're here to work, not goof off!"

Yeah, I'm sure that's the reason why you kicked me.

"By the way, when's the client getting here?" I asked.

Haruhi looked at the clock on the wall with a bit of worry. "He should be here any minute. I just talked to him half an hour ago."

By the way, in case you were wondering, Oruki was standing off to the corner of the room, watching us like a hawk. He had his arms crossed and was leaning back against the wall, indicating that he was prepared to scrutinize every detail that came out during this whole meeting. If he found even the slighting thing didn't seem right, he would pounce like a leopard on his prey. He was also starting to look impatient. Man, he was bothering the hell out of me.

Fortunately, the door bell finally rang. Haruhi forced me to answer the door.

"Good morning, Morimura-san."

Morimura bowed graciously when he saw me. It had been raining today, and so he had to put away his umbrella before entering. "Thank you so much for your time. You have no idea how much I appreciate it."

"No problem. Although I'd save your appreciation until after we solve the mystery."

Morimura-san nodded his head while I took his coat and umbrella. "I truly hope you can. You're my last hope."

You've got to be kidding me. I mean, who in their right mind would come to us if they're in a situation that desperate?

When Morimura-san entered the living room, Haruhi had every one of the other Brigade member stand up as well as herself. They all

gave a polite bow as she greeted him. "It's good to see you again Morimura-san. Please make yourself comfortable. Would you like something to drink?" I was reminded once again as to how formal and polite Haruhi usually was around most other adults.

Morimura-san shook his head. "I'm fine, thank you."

"Kyon, go get some drinks for the rest of us."

Of course your majesty. I got up from the table and walked to the refrigerator. I collected a few cans of soda and made my way back to the living room. While doing so, I passed by Oruki.

"This better be good," he said.

I smiled back at him. "You'll see."

After I had given everyone a can of soda, Haruhi addressed Morimura once more. "If you don't mind, could you introduce yourself to those of us here who don't know you?"

Morimura-san nodded and began to introduce himself. "My name is Kiyosumi Morimura. I own a grocery store down town. I met Suzumiya-san and her friends a while ago when they came to me looking for a sponsor for their movie. She told me about her club and that she wanted to promote it with a film during her school's culture festival. I told her I would be happy to as long as they helped promote my store."

Which was why Asahina-san was forced to stand outside the store wearing that skimpy bunny girl costume in the movie. As embarrassing as that was, I couldn't help but have wonderfully fond memories of Asahina-san wearing the wonderful costume. Wait, better focus before Haruhi kicks me again.

Haruhi picked up and pen and notebook. "So tell us what the problem is."

Morimura was sighed in obvious despair before he started. "It all began last Friday."

Oh great. It figures. Dammit, I hate it sometimes when I'm right. My eyes quickly darted to Asahina-san. She gave me one of those slightly nervous looks, a clear indication that what she told me two nights ago indeed had something to do with this. Joy…

"I had just received a new shipment of produce that I was planning to sell the next day. I had everything placed in the storeroom in my store, ready for when I would put it on display for the next day. However, when I returned the next day. I found that the entirety of all my produce had spoiled."

Haruhi blinked in surprise. "Spoiled? In one day? How spoiled could produce possibly get in one day?"

"It was as if they had been sitting in there for weeks. I don't get it. They were perfectly fine when I left."

Haruhi chewed on the end of her pen for a bit, trying to envision what may have happened. "Did you order another shipment of produce?"

Morimura-san nodded. "I did later that day. When the produce arrived the next day, I was sure to stay to see what might have happened." Morimura-san swallowed hard before continuing. "It was horrible. I watched as my produce literally rotted away right before my eyes. Within hours, it was completely ruined."

Everyone in the room was silent. I tried to envision what the sight of food rotting before one's very eyes would look like. No doubt it must have been a very disturbing sight.

Haruhi continued her battery of questions. "Have you had anyone inspect your storeroom?"

"Yes. I've had pest control inspect it last Monday. I also had it inspected for any other possible contaminants the day after. Neither

inspectors were able to determine the cause of the problem. They were completely baffled."

"Have you talked to your supplier?"

"I have. They didn't appear to know anything. They insisted that there was nothing wrong with the produce they were shipping me."

"Were you able to contact anyone else that also received produce from your supplier?"

"I knew of one other store that also received produce from them. I contacted them to find out if they too were having problems with their produce. They told me that they weren't having any problems with their produce at all."

The more we heard about what was happening, the more bizarre this mystery became. What the hell could cause someone's produce to rot away within hours? I had a suspicion that it had something to do with whatever this anomaly Asahina-san told me about the other night. Of course, I had to pretend that I didn't know anything. I looked at Naru-san, who appeared completely engrossed with what was happening. I then looked at Oruki, who appeared rather impressed with how his daughter was handling herself. That's a pretty good sign.

"Was there anything else that was affected? Such as your meat."

Morimura-san shook his head. "No. All of my meats, canned goods and other non-perishables were completely unaffected. It's only the produce."

"This is weird," said Haruhi as she lied down on her back to think, pen protruding out of her mouth. She moved her lips about while she lied there, causing the pen to move about in random directions. She suddenly sat up again when she thought of another question. "Have you contacted the authorities yet?"

I was beginning to wonder when she was going to ask that question. Why come to us rather than the police?

Morimura-san put his hands on his face before answering. "I can't do it. If I did, the entire public would find out about what's happening, and the reputation of my store would be ruined. I've already been struggling to compete with the Wal-mart that opened a couple years ago, and I haven't been able to have my store open since Saturday. If this keeps up, I'll lose everything." I could see now that he was on the verge of tears. I couldn't help but feel really bad for him. He was the victim of unfortunate circumstance. "You're my only hope. If you can't figure it out, I'm done for."

The room was silent again. I looked at everyone for their reaction. Naru-san and her husband appeared incredibly intrigued. The other three Brigade members remained silent, as if they were trying to feign reflection. I had a feeling that they already knew what might be happening. Haruhi, however, was definitely in deep reflection. She continued to mull over the details while randomly doodling something on her notebook. Eventually, she put her pen down and looked at Koizumi. "What do you think? You have any ideas?"

Koizumi put his hand under his chin, giving the impression of deep thinking. "This is certainly quite a bizarre mystery. I'm having a hard time figuring out what could possibly cause produce to decay so quickly. I think we should consider the three most likely candidates for what could do this. It's either something bacterial, fungal, or chemical in natural."

"What bacteria or fungus could cause fruits and vegetables to rot in only a few hours?" I asked.

"True, so our best guess at this point is that whatever is causing this is in fact chemical in nature."

"But Morimura-san here already inspected the place for chemical contamination, right?" asked Haruhi.

"That is also true, but we cannot be sure that whoever inspected the storeroom did their job properly. It is entirely possible that they overlooked something. Unfortunately, we cannot know for sure unless we investigate the storeroom ourselves."

"I agree," said Haruhi as she began to get up. "We can stay here and make useless guesses and conjectures all day, but we'll never get to the bottom of this until we go to the scene of the crime itself."

What crime? We don't even know if it's a crime yet.

Haruhi turned to Morimura-san. "Is it alright if we all go there?"

After Morimura-san nodded, everyone began to make their way outside, being sure to grab their coats and umbrellas since it was still raining. Haruhi, Asahina-san and I went into Oruki's car with himself and his wife while Koizumi and Nagato went in Morimura-san's car. I was forced to sit in the back seat in between Haruhi and Asahina-san. The car wasn't huge, so it was very cramped with the three of us. This meant that I was in very close contact with the both of them, and I'd be lying if I wasn't enjoying it a little… never mind that.

Shortly after we left, Naru-san spoke, her voice still ringing with enthusiasm. "Oh my, this is turning out to be way more exciting than I thought it would. I can't wait to find out what happened!"

Haruhi had a look of sudden confidence on her face. "I bet I know what happened. It must be a massive government conspiracy. I bet the government created some secret chemical agent design to destroy crops and thus cripple the food supply of the enemy!"

Why the hell would the Japanese government create anything like that? We haven't even had a military since World War II.

"Somehow, some of this chemical agent must have gotten into Morimura's store by negligence or maybe even purposeful intent!"

"Of course!" yelled Naru-san while pounding her right hand onto her left palm. "That has to be it! It makes perfect sense!"

No it doesn't. That's not even remotely plausible. If this was the American government we were talking about, maybe, but how would something developed by them make its way to some lowly grocery store in the middle of Japan. Please tell me you thought of this.

"Stupid, Kyon!" yelled Haruhi. "Work with me here. There must be some kind of explanation!"

I looked at Oruki. He continued to drive, acting like his wife and daughter hadn't said a thing. You just tune this out, don't you? I bet after all these years of listening to the both of them, it doesn't even faze you anymore. Or maybe you're just better at hiding your exasperation from their ridiculous statements than I am.

Eventually, all of us finally arrived at the store where the whole mess was happening at. Morimura let us all inside and lead us all to the storeroom in the back. Even before we entered the door, we could smell the horrific stink of something rotten. When we finally went through the door, we saw a large pile of completely rotten produce. The smell was overwhelming.

"Oh man, it stinks!" yelled Haruhi while holding her nose.

Every one of us with the exception of Nagato were holding our noses to reduce to horrible scent from entering our noses.

"I'm very sorry for this," said Morimura-san. "But I thought if I left the produce lying here, it might give you a clue as to what may be causing it to rot."

What possible good could come from subjecting us to this awful site and smell? It's almost too much to bear.

We began to look around the storeroom for anything that might look out of order. The storeroom was quite cool, so it seemed unlikely that

faulty refrigeration was the cause of the rotting. That wouldn't account for the food rotting so fast anyway. We tried to find any other possible indicator of what might cause the food to rot, but we couldn't find anything.

It was then that Haruhi came up with an absolutely wonderful idea. "Kyon, I want you to dig through that pile of produce to look for clues."

"What? Are you kidding me? Forget it!"

"Are you disobeying a direct order from your Brigade Chief? You will go in there and dig through it right now, or you will receive a penalty so great it will make hell itself cringe from it!"

"But what if there's something in there that could make me sick or worse?"

"All the more reason why you must be the one to do it. You're nothing more than a bottom feeder in rank."

"Isn't Nagato the same rank as me? Why can't she help?"

"You would dare let a lady go through something that disgusting? What kind of man are you? Where are your balls?"

Realizing that I wasn't going to get out of this, I hung my head in defeat as I slowly approached the god-awful mess in front of me. I slowly reached my hand out and picked up a piece of lettuce… at least I think it was a piece of lettuce. I wasn't so sure now that I thought about it. I looked it over quickly and then tossed it to the side. I then went and picked another… thing.

Haruhi grew impatient with my progress. "Quit being a baby, Kyon! Just dig your hands in there and really start looking! No more excuses!"

I swear to the heavens that one of these days I will get even with you, Haruhi. Even if it's the last thing I do.

I looked at the pile one last time before closing my eyes, taking a deep breath, and plunging both hands into it. Oh my god is this the most disgusting sensation ever. It's even worse than when I had to clean the gutters a week and a half ago. I had to hold my breath since I couldn't hold my nose during all this. I turned towards the others to see their reaction while I was doing this. Everyone except for Nagato and Oruki were showing mild signs of disgust as I continued to dig into this crap. Oruki himself was actually chuckling while he watched me suffer. You're enjoying this, aren't you? You really are a sadist.

I knew from the beginning that there was no point to this. All I was doing was covering my hands in slime and gunk while my clothes got ruined. It was when I got my hands on a tomato that I started to lose it. I watched as its insides oozed out from its skin in a brown, fetid liquid. I couldn't hold it any longer. I began to gag, and I quickly had to rush to the closest garbage can and hurl. I spent the next minute completely unable to move as I continued to puke into the garbage can. Eventually, I was at the point where I was dry heaving as there was nothing left to puke out. It was only after finally stopped heaving that I spoke again. "I can't do this anymore."

Haruhi huffed a bit after I spoke. "Fine. It doesn't look like we'll find anything of value in there anyway."

How wonderful that you had to wait until I was reduced to this before you finally moved on.

Haruhi eventually decided that a proper investigation of the storeroom meant that we had to remove everything out of the storeroom, including all of the meats, canned foods and anything else not currently contaminated. This of course meant that I had to once again work my ass off. I was only given enough time to clean my hands and mouth off before I was once again forced to carry everything out.

"Why can't Koizumi help me?" I asked with a grunt as I carried a box of cans out of the room.

"You see how well dressed he is," said Haruhi. "I can't in good conscience make him work and ruin his suit."

Man I'm really starting to hate you and Koizumi right now. I am now completely dead set on the fact that solving mysteries is no longer fun. I hate this crap! I hate it!

Okay, so maybe I didn't really mean that, but right now I was really starting to lose my patience with all the abuse I was taking today.

While I was slaving away clearing the storeroom, Asahina-san began to complain to Haruhi. "Suzumiya-san, it's really stinky in here. I can't take it anymore."

"That's okay, Mikuru-chan," said Haruhi as she opened her purse. "I have something I want you to do while we wait on Kyon. I want you to go to the closest store you can find and buy an apple, okay?" She then handed Asahina-san a five-hundred yen coin. Asahina-san nodded cooperatively and hurried off, likely to escape the smell as soon as possible.

It took me almost an hour to finally clear out the storeroom. By the time I had finished, Asahina-san had finally returned with the apple in hand. Haruhi took it from her and placed on the shelf. "I want to see for myself what would happen if we brought in a fresh apple from another store. I had a hunch that it's probably something in the storeroom and not previous contamination that is causing the produce to rot. If I'm right, it shouldn't take long before this apple starts to become mushy, too."

"That's a wonderful idea, Haru-chan!" praised Naru-san. "You really are so incredibly smart!"

I was actually quite surprised to find that Koizumi hadn't praised her first, but when I looked at him, I noticed that he no longer had a smile

on his face. I waited until everyone was distracted watching the apple before I approached him. "Is something up?"

"Yes," said Koizumi, trying to keep his voice low. "I wasn't able to pick it up at first due to the overpowering smell of the decaying produce, but now that my senses have adjusted, I've been able to pick up something else. This room has a smell to it."

"Like close space? Or that other place where we met the camel cricket?"

"It's different from either. I have a feeling Nagato-san might know more."

I turned to Nagato, who was standing close by. "Is that true?"

"Yes…"

"What's going on?"

"Multi-level data disruption."

"What?"

Koizumi moved closer to me, coming far too close to my face. "I think it's best that we try to get the others out of here before we continue on."

That great, but could you tell me that without getting so close to my face. You'd think that by now that you would've figured out that I hate it when you do that!

"Look! It's happening!" yelled Haruhi while pointing at the apple. Just as she said, the apple was already showing signs that it was beginning to rot away. It was showing small brown spots that were growing with every passing minute. Watching this, combined with everything that Koizumi, Nagato and Asahina-san had told me, there was no longer any doubt that whatever was causing this rapid decay was supernatural in origin. I had to think of a way to get Haruhi, her

parents, and Morimura-san out of here so we could do something about it.

"Um… Haruhi?"

"What is it, Kyon? Do you know something?"

"I was thinking… do you think it might be a good idea to check out the supplier as well?"

"Why should we have to?" asked Haruhi as she pointed to the apple which still continued to rot. "It's obvious that whatever is happening to the produce is coming from this room."

"Yes, but it still may be possible that the original contaminant came from the supplier. I was thinking that you should probably go down there and question the people in charge of the place. I know you're good at getting answers from people. Maybe they know something that they just didn't want to tell Morimura-san."

Haruhi had started to stare at me suspiciously until Koizumi intervened. "I have to agree with Kyon-kun. We cannot conduct a proper investigation without also checking up on the supplier."

Haruhi thought over what we had said before finally deciding. "Excellent idea, Koizumi!"

Hey, wait a minute. It was my idea.

"I'll go down to the supplier and see if I can get those guys over there to talk." She then grabbed Asahina-san. "Maybe I can bribe them into talking by offering Mikuru-chan's body to them!"

Asahina-san whimpered in fear at the thought of being used as a bribe. "B… but… I…"

"Sounds good," said Koizumi. "Myself, Nagato, and Kyon-kun will continue our investigation here. We'll keep you posted if we find anything."

"Okay," said Haruhi as she then walked up to Morimura-san. "Can you lead me to the location of your supplier?"

Morimura-san nodded compliantly. "Absolutely. I'll drive you there myself."

"Great!" yelled Haruhi as she began to drag Asahina-san out of the store. "Let's go!"

"But I don't want to offer them my body!" screamed Asahina-san uselessly as Morimura followed the both of them outside. I'm sorry, Asahina-san. At least, you won't have to face whatever it is that's causing all these problems for Morimura-san.

I then went up to Oruki. "I think it might be a good idea if you followed them. I'm worried your daughter might get herself into trouble."

Oruki narrowed his eyes at me before he shrugged. "Whatever." He then began to walk out of the store. "Let's go, Naru-san."

Naru-san pouted in disappointment. "But I want to stay here."

"We'll come back later. I'd rather not have my daughter get herself thrown in jail or something."

Naru-san sighed deeply before listening to her husband's orders. She and her husband finally left the building, leaving only Koizumi, Nagato and myself left in the building. I breathed a sigh of relief when everyone was gone. That was a lot easier than I thought it would be.

I then turned to Koizumi and Nagato. "Care to explain what the hell is going on here?"

Nagato was the first to speak. "I have detected multiple disturbances in the data layers between standard analog and super-analog."

I stared at Nagato for a minute, completely lost after hearing what she said. "What?"

Nagato continued her explanation. "The disturbance between these layers have caused a corruption of all objects within the area that contain large amounts of cellulose. The cellulose inside all of the plant matter inside this room has broken down into its most simple components, causing the plant matter to rapidly decompose."

Can I get that in laymen's terms?

As usual, Koizumi was happy to take the role as Nagato translator. "I think what she's trying to say is that whatever is contained within this room exists in a form that's not detectable to us, but is fully capable of interacting with objects within this room. For whatever reason, it seems to have an affect on the cell walls contained in every cell within all plant matter. When the cell walls for the plant are destroyed, that result is the rapid decay of the plant. Since all produce are derived from plants, they too are affected."

"Okay, but what the hell did she mean when she said 'standard analog' and 'super-analog'?"

Nagato once again spoke. "Multiple layers exist between the analog and digital spectrum."

"Ah, I understand now," said Koizumi.

What did you understand?

"What Nagato-san is trying to say is that reality in our world exists in several different spectrums. The ones we are most familiar with are analog and digital. For example, we ourselves and everything we can see exist in the analog spectrum, while other objects and lifeforms exist in the digital spectrum, such as those data lifeforms we came across a few months ago or even the Entity that Nagato-san herself serves. Nagato-san herself is in fact a halfway point between the two. She is a being that exists in both the analog and

the digital spectrum simultaneously. However, there are deeper layers on both spectrums than analog and digital. Moving further along on either side, we come across what are known as super-analog and super-digital spectrums. Am I correct?"

"Correct," said Nagato.

"Excellent," said Koizumi before continuing. "Anyway, whatever it is that we're dealing with, it is every bit as invisible to us as the digital lifeforms that we dealt with before, but the properties of this lifeform are very different. For example, I remember that the data lifeforms were strongly attracted to lifeforms such as dogs, attaching to them and causing them to become ill. Perhaps this super-analog lifeform is attracted to plant matter in the same way. Do you understand?"

Nope. Didn't understand a word you said. You may as well have been speaking Latin to me.

"Forget the explanation," I said. "Is there anyway you can just freeze whatever it is that is killing off the produce, Nagato?"

"No," responded Nagato. "I was designed to be able to interact with digital and analog data. I cannot interact with super-analog data without converting this space, including ourselves, into super-analog. After conversion, we will have to deal with the lifeform in a more direct manner."

So we're going to have to fight this thing, huh? Well it's a good thing you two are here.

"Conversion from standard analog to super-analog will takes some time. May I begin?"

It appeared Nagato was asking if I was ready, perhaps remembering the last few times she went and messed with stuff that I kinda freaked out. How very courteous of her.

Before I could answer, though, my cell phone went off. I picked it up to find that it was Haruhi.

"What's up?"

"I wanted to let you know that we're almost to where the supplier is."

"Okay, is that all?"

"No, there was something else. My parents aren't following us anymore."

At first, I became worried when she said this. "Do you know what happened?"

"I watched as my dad turned the car around and drove off. He then called me on his cell phone and told me he'd seen enough and that he was going home."

I sighed deeply in relief when I heard that. "Really? Does that mean we're off the hook?"

Haruhi sounded unsure. "He didn't say. I'm not sure what he was thinking."

I'm just glad that he's out of the way. I'm sure Naru-san was disappointed to have to leave before the mystery was resolved. "I guess all we need to worry about now is solving this mystery."

"Yup. We're here now. I'll call back soon if we find anything."

"See ya," I said as I shut the phone. I almost felt bad for the people who worked for the supplier. I already knew by now that all Haruhi was going to do was make their lives miserable.

I looked at Koizumi and Nagato. "Haruhi's parents went home. Sounds like we convinced them."

"That's good to hear," said Koizumi. "Now all we have to do is deal with whatever is inside this room while we still have time. We need to finish this before Suzumiya-san returns."

"Right," I said as I looked at Nagato. "Go ahead and do whatever you need to do. I'm ready."

With that said, Nagato put her hand out and began to chant. As always, the things she was saying came out with such blinding speed that it was impossible to make out what she was saying. Despite this, it took almost a minute before she finally finished doing whatever it is that she was doing. All of a sudden, a bright, bluish light overtook us, and I was momentarily blinded.

Fast forward to where we were now. The three of us stared down this disgusting mess of tentacles, mouths and eyes, preparing to face off against it… or at least those two were. This "super-analog lifeform", which shall henceforth be referred to as "The Tentacle Beast", stared us down with growing hostility. Not wanting to find out what this thing was capable of, I was quick to voice my desires to Koizumi, who was way too busy talking.

"Just kill it already!"

"Very well," said Koizumi as he launched the ball of energy into the air and smacked it as it came down. I still maintained the belief that it was a really stupid attack. "Fumoffu!" The ball of energy shot forward like a missile, smashing into the creature with tremendous force. The explosion hit it with monstrous impact, leaving a large dust cloud. After about a minute, the dust cloud settled, revealing that the creature was in fact completely unharmed.

"It's more resilient than I had anticipated," said Koizumi, still looking ever so calm.

The Tentacle Beast responded to the attack by transforming six tentacles into what appeared to be insect-like legs. The legs

smashed into the cement below, cracking and penetrating it. It then began to lift itself off the ground with those legs. Finally, the mouth in the center gave an absolutely deafening roar that shook the ground around us. The only conclusions I could make out of this was that it was pissed and about to attack.

It was then that I heard a voice scream out. "What the hell is that thing?!"

I paused to try and figure out the source of the voice. It wasn't Koizumi and it definitely wasn't Nagato. I know I didn't say it. Who the hell said it then? I noticed both Koizumi and Nagato had turned their heads toward something behind us. I then turned around to find a site more frightening than even the monster we were facing.

No… NO! It can be! That's not possible! How did they get in here?!

Before me, standing right at the door to the storeroom, were both of Haruhi's parents…

It's official… I'm evil. Oh so incredibly evil. And I love it!

Perhaps I should take a break for a week before writing the next chapter, just to mess with you guys.

Just kidding… or am I?

Chapter 14

I want to apologize for allowing this chapter to take so long to be posted. The truth is that I didn't intend for this chapter to be delayed this long. What happened is that my computer's video card crapped out and I had to wait for it to be replaced before I could finish the chapter. In the mean time, I could only use my father's computer, which is a piece of crap that barely works.

A lot of you guys have been taking stabs at where I got the inspiration for the monster in this chapter from. If I had to think, I'd say it was from the D&D Monster Manual, but for the most part it's made up from my head. Sorry if it's not the most original idea. I still hope you find the fight to be enjoyable nevertheless.

Oh, and I'd like to voice my frustration to KyoAni for making the Endless Eight at least five episodes long. I mean… WTF? It's almost too much… -_- Oh, and this chapter contains spoilers for Endless Eight. If you don't want to know what happens… then I guess you can't read my chapter. :P

Anyway, I know you've been waiting for this. Here's the conclusion for Saturday.

Chapter 14

You know, it's not like I should be overly surprised by all this. I had always wondered if sooner or later I was going to get caught like this by some one who wasn't supposed to find out. I'd initially figured it would have been Haruhi, but I'd also considered the possibilities of Tsuruya-san, Taniguchi, Kunikida or even my little sister being accidentally caught up in this strange world that goes on behind the scenes when no one is looking. Never once did I really think that

Haruhi's parents were going to be the ones that would catch us. In hindsight, I should have considered the possibility more seriously.

And now, the two of them are staring directly at the monstrosity on the other side of the room. I haven't known the two of them long, but I was certain that they'd never seen anything ever remotely like this before.

Oruki's reaction to it was a mix of awe and terror. To be honest, I almost enjoyed seeing the look of fear on his face. It kinda served him right. No matter how tough he thought he was, he sure as hell was out of his league here.

Naru-san's reaction was… completely different. The best way to describe her reaction was fascination. She appeared completely enthralled by the site of the disgusting Tentacle Beast before her. It was clear from the look on her face that the possibility of extreme danger did not even register. Does she even realize that her life is at risk? I mean, I'm sure she must have been bored as hell staying in her home all day, but there's a limit.

I turned back to Koizumi and Nagato, who were both still staring at Oruki and Naru-san. I was about to ask what had happened, but apparently Nagato already predicted my question and answered it before I even opened my mouth.

"I was careless…"

Careless? What do you mean careless? Just how often does it happen that you make a mistake? Hell, I personally can only think of one myself. That would be your inability to detect Ryoko Asakura's rogue behavior until she almost killed me. Other than that, your execution was flawless.

Koizumi interrupted us before Nagato could explain further. "I would hate to break up this conversation, but unfortunately, we have a bigger problem to deal with."

Oh right, the monster. Might be a good idea to deal with it before we figure out what went wrong.

In the mean time, the Tentacle Beast had begun to walk towards us with its newfound legs. Its pace was slow and lumbering, but the room was definitely not large enough to give us a lot of time before it would be right on top of us. Koizumi took the initiative to launch another ball of energy directly at it again. Once again, it collided and exploded with enough force to easily decimate a tank, but when the dust cleared, the monster still appeared unharmed.

The creature decided it was its own turn to counter-attack. It swung one of its own tentacles directly at Koizumi. He was barely able to leap out of the way before the tentacle smashed into the concrete below, delivering enough force to crack it into pieces. Koizumi rolled away and tried to launch another attack, but another tentacle had snuck up and managed to grab him by the ankle. He was picked up and swung around in the air in a circle multiple times before he was thrown directly into a nearby wall. I noticed that just before he crashed into it that he transformed into a glowing red ball, presumably to protect himself.

"Koizumi!" I yelled out of concern for his well being. I mean, sure he was an annoying, smiling bastard, but I still considered him my friend. When I didn't see Koizumi exit from the hole in the wall, I'd assumed the worst.

"It's an oni, isn't it?! I can't believe it! It must be an oni! Oni, oni, oni, oni, oni!"

I turn to the door to find that Naru-san now had a million-watt smile plastered on her face. The same one Haruhi had when she saw the Shinjin in that closed space nearly a year ago. I almost wanted to yell at her for her lack of concern at the severity of the situation. After all, it was entirely possible the Koizumi was seriously hurt, or worse.

Unfortunately, there was no time to mourn the loss of the esper or yell at Naru-san, as the monster had now begun to focus its attention

on Nagato and myself. It swung several tentacles in our direction, all of which were moving with enough force to easily kill an ordinary person. Luckily, Nagato reacted quickly and put her hand up just in time to create a shield. The tentacle crashed harmlessly into it, causing the light around it to bend and shift. The tentacles continued to bash repeatedly against the shield, each impact seemingly having no effect on the shield. I had always wondered how much punishment her shield could take. Apparently, it seemed indestructible, as no matter how hard the tentacle hit it, no actual damage was apparent.

The assault continued for about thirty seconds before I noticed a pair of tentacles from behind the creature smashing into the concrete below it. At first, I wasn't sure what was happening until I suddenly the sensation of the vibrations from the ground below. Realizing what was happening, I immediately warned Nagato. "Nagato! Behind you!"

Just as I finish saying that, the tentacles burst from the ground below from behind Nagato and had swung horizontally to hit her. Fortunately, my warning came just in time and Nagato swiftly ducked under the attack. However, her shield deactivated the moment she moved, meaning that the tentacles in front of her could now strike at her. Just as they were about to, Nagato suddenly leapt high into the air.

Seeing her up there was like watching poetry in motion. Nagato was the picture of athletic elegance. She had leapt right over the top of the creature, twisted and turned in mid-air, and then held her hand out all in the time the average person took to blink. I was glad I didn't blink, or I would have missed it. I then watched her mouth move at impossible speeds before I noticed the metal support structures turning into a half dozen long, metal spears. The spears were then launched directly at the Tentacle Beast before Nagato landed on the other side.

To my surprise, however, the spears did not penetrate the monster's body. In fact, they bounced off harmlessly. How could that be

possible? I remember those same spears launched by Ryoko went straight through Nagato when those two fought. Just what is this creature's skin made out of?

Nagato repeated the same attack, once again leaping elegantly into the air and chanting away to gather more metal from the support structures above. I had momentarily worried that the ceiling might collapse, but I figured that Nagato probably knew what she was doing. However, this time she created one very large spear and once again launched it at the Tentacle Monster. Incomprehensibly, even that spear failed to penetrate and once again bounced off harmlessly. I was beginning to seriously wonder if this thing was completely invincible.

Nagato landed again and had begun to do several back flips in order to put more distance between herself and the monster. Unfortunately, by doing this, I was now left with nothing between myself and the mass of powerful tentacles that were now poised to strike. I noticed one of the eyes on a tentacle looking directly at me before it instinctively swung itself at me. Nagato tried to rush forward to protect me, but there was too much distance between her and myself. I thought for sure that my life was about to end.

Fortunately, a small red flash appeared from out of nowhere and deflected the attack just before it hit me. I then turned towards the direction from where the flash came from to find that Koizumi was alive and well. He suit was now ripped and torn, which made me a little happy inside. Hey, I maybe glad that Koizumi's alright, but absolutely hated his suit.

As Koizumi continued to throw small flashes of red energy to distract the beast, I soon heard another exclamation from Naru-san. "This is absolutely freaking awesome!"

"Are you out of your mind?!" screamed Oruki in response to what his wife said. My sentiments exactly. I'd figured it would be a cold day in hell before Oruki and I would find something to agree on. Perhaps he and I were not so different.

Meanwhile, Koizumi continued to launch his small flashes of light at the creature as he continued to back up. Eventually, he ran out of room to back up, and was now cornered. Just as the Tentacle Beast was about to attack, I noticed it doing something unusual. Five of the tentacles began to wrap themselves around each other before they merged together into once extremely large tentacle. Right after it had done that, the enormous tentacle was swung down directly at the esper, almost certainly to try to finish him off. Just before it landed, Koizumi transformed into a ball of red energy again and quickly evaded the attack. He then moved directly over the creature in a flash of blinding speed before landing near Nagato and myself. I watched as Koizumi hunched forward and began to breath heavily, obviously winded.

"I can't keep transforming like that. If I do, I'll burn through all my reserves." He then stood up straight again and looked directly at the monster, his face now displaying complete seriousness. "This isn't good. It doesn't seem like any of our attacks have any affect on him at all."

"Analysis has indicated that the super-analog lifeform's epidermal layer is completely impregnable," said Nagato.

"I see," said Koizumi. "Then it doesn't look like we can beat it."

"Further analysis has indicated that the internal structures within the lifeform are far more easily compromised."

"Ah, so that's it."

What's it?

Koizumi smile returned upon hearing this information. "So if I manage to land an attack directly inside that oversize mouth it has, I should be able to kill it, right?"

"Correct."

Are you kidding me? Don't tell me that it's the good, old fashioned attack the mouth weak point that's way overused in video games. Now that I think about it, I already knew that Haruhi occasionally played video games. Maybe she subconsciously gave this thing that weakness because of it.

By now, the monster was once again about to reach us. Koizumi created another ball of light as it approached. "With some luck I should be able to guide this attack directly into its mouth and put an end to this." Koizumi then threw the ball of energy. "Second Raid!"

The ball soared in an arch directly on target. It looked like this would be over for sure, but something happened that was unexpected. The creature's mouth suddenly closed and then retracted inside itself. The ball of energy smashed right into where the mouth would've been, but the attack was once again rendered harmless. The monster's mouth reappeared shortly afterwards as if nothing happened.

Even Koizumi could only barely hide his growing frustration. "Not good… I certainly did not expect that." He then tried to launch another attack at it mouth, but it simply did the same thing, retracting its mouth inside itself and preventing any damage from being sustained. This was starting to look hopeless.

How the hell are we going to beat this thing? The one place where it had a weakness keeps being blocked off. I was seriously starting to think that we all might get killed.

Still wielding the giant tentacle, the Tentacle Beast swung it directly to where Koizumi and Nagato were standing. However, to my absolute horror, the tentacle was also directly in the path of where Oruki was standing. I don't know what came over me, but the instant I realized that his life was in danger, I instinctively dove right at him. Fortunately, I tackled and moved him out of harms way. I noticed Koizumi and Nagato had also leapt out of the way of the tentacle. It smashed down with thunderous force, almost deafening me, but I was safe… and so was Oruki. He seemed in daze, but otherwise

unharmed. Naru-san, who was standing nearby, now had her hands on her mouth in horror, as if for the first time since the battle started that she realized just how much danger we were all in.

"Are you alright?" I asked the both of them. Oruki never responded, but Naru-san nodded. It was then that her eyes widened in further horror. "Kyon-kun, look out!"

I turned towards the tentacle to see what it was doing, but it was too late. It had apparently split back into its five original tentacles, and one of them grabbed me by my ankle. I screamed in fear as it hoisted me up in the air. Once again, I thought for sure that my life was going to end. I was about fifteen feet in the air, and I got the sudden feeling that I was about to be slammed directly into the ground. I knew for sure that such an attack would kill me instantly.

Fortunately, Koizumi launched an attack that landed in one of the smaller mouths that was sitting at the base of the tentacle. It blew the entire tentacle off, sparing me from being splattered onto the concrete below. To my dismay, though, I was quickly snatched up by another tentacle, this time wrapping around my waist. Koizumi tried again to free me, but he was hit directly in the chest with a tentacle the came from his blind side, knocking him against the wall. He collapsed onto the ground, looking badly injured. Worse yet, the tentacle he blew off quickly regenerated.

I began to beat my fist uselessly against the tentacle, hoping to break free of its grip, but it was to no avail. I then watched in horror as one of the tentacles with a mouth at the end had moved directly in front of me. I watched as it began to open up, a clear indicator that it was about to attack. I unthinkingly grabbed it before it did, and began to fight with it to prevent it from biting my face off. Unfortunately, it was much stronger than me, and I could feel myself losing ground as the mouth came closer and closer. I also noticed the other tentacles with mouths at the end getting ready to bite the rest of me. There was no hope of me surviving. I was done for…

Except that a white beam-like light swooped upwards and smacked the tentacle away from my face. It then came around and smacked the other tentacles away as well. It only deterred them momentarily though, as they then tried again to attack me before being smacked away again. It was then that I noticed where the beam-like light was coming from. I looked at Nagato and saw that her hands had been replaced by long, bright, beam-like tentacles, similar to the ones Ryoko used to attack her with almost a year ago.

Dozens of tentacles were now attacking me simultaneously from all directions. Nagato continued to whip her appendages around at blazing speed, smacking away every tentacle that tried to attack me in a desperate attempt to save me life. The lights danced around in a manner one would have to see to believe. What was just as amazing was that the beam-like appendages never came close to touching me, always moving around me to smack away the next tentacle.

Eventually, the Tentacle Beast grew tired of not being able to finish me off and instead put its focus back on Nagato. It then merged every tentacle it had except the one holding onto me and the ones used as legs. It now had an absolutely monstrously large tentacle that easily dwarfed the earlier ones. It then swung it down at Nagato with incredible force.

Nagato was force to block the attack with both her beam-like appendages. It smashed right on top of her devastatingly, but she was still standing. The tentacle was swung down again, smashing her yet again. This time she was force down onto one knee, and the concrete around her began to break and collapse below her. Again and again, the enormous tentacle pounded away at Nagato as she could only helplessly continue to block it. Every blow pounded her deeper into the concrete as a huge indentation began to form underneath her. I began to wonder how she could take it. She looked so small and fragile that you'd think the lightest attack would break her into pieces. Nevertheless, I knew that even she had her limits. I could tell that her body was starting to show signs of breaking from the relentless assault. I wasn't really sure if Nagato had bones like

normal people do, but if she did, they were definitely broken by now. Just when it seemed like Nagato was about to be finished off, a huge red ball crashed directly into the beast, smashing it directly into the wall next to it.

I realized that Koizumi had gotten back up and turned himself into a ball or energy again. He then charged directly into the monster in an attempt to prevent the monster from finishing off Nagato. Doing so, however, caused me to fall to the ground as the monster was knocked off balance. I hit the ground hard, but I wasn't hurt seriously. Unfortunately, the tentacle around my waist was still holding onto me.

"I can't do that again," said Koizumi, looking completely exhausted. "If I do, I'll be completely spent."

And worse yet, the monster was getting up again, still not appearing hurt at all. This was bad. At the rate we were going at, we were all going to be killed, even Nagato. I looked over to where she was. She was on her hands and knees inside the crater that was created while she was being smashed inside it. I knew that it wouldn't take very long for her to recover, but she was out of the fight until then. The creature was now standing on all of its legs again and was about to pick me up. Just before it did, I spotted one of the metal spears that Nagato had made earlier. It was just within my reach. I grabbed onto it and pulled it towards me as I was lifted into the air.

I took the spear and began to whack away at the tentacle holding onto me, hoping beyond hope that it would be enough to make it let go of me. I even tried to stab it, too, but just as expected, I was unable to cause any actual damage. It was when an eye moved up the tentacle and looked directly at me that I decided to stab at that instead. Big mistake… Apparently, the eyes were not immune to damage the same way the skin was, so when I stabbed it, it was painfully injured. Sadly, all this really did was piss the creature off tremendously. It gave another deafening roar as it began to move me directly towards its main mouth. Oh crap! It's going to eat me!

I continued to struggle helplessly as I slowly moved toward the mouth. I could see it dripping with what I could only assume was something close to saliva. I could even smell this thing's breath. In fear and panic, I thrust the spear at its mouth in the hope that it would protect me… And then a miracle happened. Somehow, when I thrust the spear in there, it got stuck in its mouth at the right angle to prevent the beast from being able to close its mouth. I watched as it shook its head and jaws violently to try and dislodge the spear, but it stayed put no matter how hard it tried. I quickly realized that this was our chance. I turned to Koizumi and yelled out his name.

"Great job, Kyon-kun! I should have just enough power left to finish this off."

I then watched as one last giant ball of energy appeared from his hand. He threw it up into the air and jumped up after it. He then hit it with a double-fisted hammer. "Final Cascade!"

The ball spun in a spiral as it made its way directly into the exposed mouth of the Tentacle Beast. I watched as the eyes of the monster quickly dilated completely just before it exploded into a million little pieces. I was thrown several feet away from the force of the explosion, along with the tentacle that still clung to me involuntarily. When the explosion subsided, I landed hard on the broken concrete, the impact wrecking my shoulder pretty badly. I also soon felt the sensation of small slimy pieces of goo landing on my body from the monster. After wincing in pain, I looked around me to see that there were tentacles all around us on the ground, still writhing about involuntarily. After about another minute, they all began to dissipate in much the same way Ryoko Asakura did when Nagato defeated her. Eventually, all remnants of the Tentacle Beast were gone, and all that remained were myself, Nagato, Koizumi and Haruhi's parents.

I looked at each of them to see if they were okay. Koizumi was down on one knee, obviously completely spent and exhausted from the battle. Nagato was now standing, looking like she'd fully recovered from her attack. Finally, both Oruki and Naru-san were fine, too, but I

noted that the spear that I used to wedge open the monster's mouth had flown directly at them during the explosion and became stuck in the wall only a few inches from Oruki's head. He was staring at it now, looking somewhat disturbed.

I soon got to my feet and approached Koizumi and Nagato. "Well, now that we've taken care of that thing, mind explaining to me how 'they' got in here?"

Nagato began to explain, showing subtle hints of shame while speaking. "I was unable to detect their approach while I was converting the space inside this structure into super-analog. Care should have been taken to ensure no one would have entered the premises while the conversion took place."

"What? You mean that while you were chanting away, that those two entered the grocery store?"

"Yes."

I remembered the fact that Nagato's "spell" took almost a good minute for her to cast before we were suddenly warped inside this blurry, blue world. In that narrow span of time, Haruhi's parents must have entered the building, so when we got transported to this weird place, so did they. The only questions left now were why they came here in the first place, and what do we do now.

"I'm afraid it doesn't matter why they came back," said Koizumi. "The truth is that the both of them have seen too much. We can't let them leave this place with their memories intact."

I felt a sudden, overwhelming sense of dread when I heard this. "Wait! Hold on! Are you going to do what I think you're going to do?"

Nagato nodded lightly. "I will have to manipulate their memories to prevent the both of them from ascertaining the truth."

My heart raced violently at the thought that Nagato was about to mess with their heads. Never once did I like the idea of it, and I knew I couldn't stand for it. "Stop! Do we have to do this?!"

"We don't have a choice," said Koizumi with complete seriousness. "In order to prevent Suzumiya-san from discovering the truth about her powers, leaving her parents ignorant of the truth is necessary. The risk that both of them could go and tell her the truth is extremely high."

I knew that, but despite all of that, I still hated the idea. "Couldn't we tell them not to tell Haruhi the truth? If we explained why, I'm sure they'd understand."

"Maybe they will. Maybe they won't. The risk will still be far too great."

I looked back at the two of them. Oruki had begun to pull away at the spear in the wall while Naru-san watched us with definite curiosity. "This is wrong. Messing with their minds. Didn't you say yourself that this wasn't the perfect solution to this problem anyway? There's always the chance that they could find out again. Or there might be the chance that they could upset Haruhi enough to cause another world ending closed space to appear again. This is our chance to tell them the truth and prevent what happened earlier this week from ever happening again."

"That maybe true," said Koizumi. "But our superiors both agree that…"

"Forget your damn superiors! Do you two always agree with what they want you to do?"

Koizumi was silent for a few seconds. "I've told you before that I'm only a low ranking member of the Organization. My personal feelings cannot get in the way of my orders."

"Your superiors don't even know these people personally. How can they possibly know what could happen if we were to tell them the truth? And besides, didn't you once tell me that if you were ever given the choice, you would choose to take my side over your Organization's. Well, right now I need you to be on my side about this."

Koizumi didn't answer me right away, but I could tell he was becoming very conflicted. I then turned to Nagato. "What about you? You've defied your boss before. Do you really agree with him on how we should handle this? Do you really think this is right?"

Nagato was silent as well for a brief time before answering. "Even if I do not personally find satisfaction with the act of removing their memories, I cannot argue against the calculations made about the risks."

"I see," I said as I took in a deep breath, realizing what I had to do. "Okay, then. If you guys won't help me, then…" I held my arms out to the sides to block their path. "You're going to have to go through me, instead."

I knew that my resistance was completely futile. Neither one of them would have even the slightest difficulty defeating me if they were to ever seriously try. However, I also knew that neither of them would ever try to hurt me, as I was both their close friend and the one person Haruhi was closest to. I banked on the hope that the two of them would be too afraid of hurting me to try and get through me.

The face off between the three of us felt like it lasted forever, even though it was probably closer to two minutes. Eventually, I noticed Koizumi's expression began to soften, and eventually he gave me his trademark smile.

"Is that how it is?" He then gave a large sigh. "You've grown quite fond of them, haven't you?" After watching me blink in confusion from this statement, he put his hand on his chin and chuckled lightly. "It's amazing. You've only known them for a mere two weeks and

you're already willing to put your own life risk for their sake. You must've bonded with them quite a bit in that short period of them."

Have I really? Is it really possible that I've really grown that close to them since I first met them? I mean, I guess I could say that for Naru-san for sure, but Oruki… to be honest, I thought I hated him, but… maybe somewhere deep inside me, I thought that maybe he was okay. I can't say I really liked him, though. Then how do I explain the fact that I just saved his life only minutes earlier? But… wouldn't I have done the same for someone else? Aw man, now I'm really confused.

"Very well," said Koizumi. "I'll do this your way, but I can't guarantee that my superiors would be happy with me about this. For now, however, we'll see how this works out."

I looked at Nagato. "And you?"

"The Entity has decided to recalculate the probability that Suzumiya-san parental figures will reveal the truth to Suzumiya-san. Until then, I will suspend the action of removing their memories. However, if the Entity decides that the probability is still unacceptably high, either myself or others will be forced to act."

"I see…" I said, feeling slightly relieved. There was no way to know what would happen in the near future, but for now, Haruhi's parents would be spared. I then turned to Oruki and Naru-san. By now, Oruki had managed to pull the spear out of the wall and was brandishing it as a weapon, and Naru-san had completely lost interest in what we were saying, finding the weirdness of the blurry wall to be of much greater interest.

"I guess we need to explain everything to them, then," I said as I looked back at Koizumi. "I think it's best if you do the honors. Explaining stuff is what you do best anyway."

"Very well," said Koizumi as the three of us began to walk towards Oruki and Naru-san.

"Stay the hell away from us!" screamed Oruki as he raised the spear, ready to thrust it at any of us if we got too close.

I held my hands in front of me and tried to calm him down. "Hold on, Oruki. I'm sure you're pretty freaked out right about now. And I know that we have a lot to explain…"

"You're damn #$%ing right you do!"

"And we will. Just put the spear down and we'll talk. There's a lot you two need to know."

Oruki looked at us suspiciously for about a good minute before Naru-san began to plead with him.

"Oruki-kun, please calm down. I'm sure Kyon-kun wouldn't hurt us."

It was only when he heard his wife's pleading that he began to calm down. He slowly put the spear down. Eventually, he let it rest on the ground vertically, still holding onto it with one hand. "Okay… talk!"

I turned to Koizumi giving him his cue that it was his turn to begin to explain. He stood there for a minute, obviously trying to think of what to say. "Let's see… where we should we begin… Well, I guess I should start with where we currently are and what that creature was that we just defeated." He waves his hand about the room while explaining. "It's a bit complicated to explain what this place is. I guess it would simplest to say that this room we're in is another form of reality. My colleague, Nagato-san, calls it super-analog space. It's okay if you don't understand what that means. All I can say is that we came here in order to fight that monster you saw earlier. It was the real cause of the rapid decay in all the produce."

Naru-san nodded her head, completely absorbed into what Koizumi was saying. She acted like she knew what the hell he was talking about. On the other hand, Oruki appeared completely baffled and speechless. While it was obvious that both Naru-san and Haruhi were people who loved the supernatural and actively sought to find

it, Oruki was the exact opposite. He was a man who was perfectly happy with reality the way most people perceived it. I didn't expect him to take any of this well.

Oruki then shook his head a bit and held out his hand. "Hold on! Just who the hell are you people anyway?"

"Yes, I was just getting to that," said Koizumi as his smile grew a bit. "I'm sure by now you've realized that both Nagato-san and I are not what you call normal. I myself am what is called an esper."

"And you?" asked Oruki, pointing to Nagato.

"I am a human interface created by the Integrated Data Sentient Entity as a means to make contact with human beings."

"Huh?" said Oruki, looking completely confused.

"It's easier just to call her an alien," I said, scratching the back of my head. "And also, the other girl in our club, Asahina-san. She's actually from the future. She's what would be called a time-traveler."

I noticed Naru-san's excitement beginning to peak. She ran up to me with all the energy of a young kid meeting Santa Claus. "Ooo let me guess! I bet that you're the reincarnation of some great Japanese hero!"

Uh… no.

"Are you the some lost spirit that possessed the body of some random teenage boy?"

No.

"Are you a devil that surfaced from hell and has taken a human form?"

No!

"Oh, I know! You're from an alternate universe in search for adventure!"

NO!

Koizumi chuckled while he listened to Naru-san's guess at my identity. "I'm sorry, Naru-san, but I'm afraid my colleague Kyon-kun is nothing more than an ordinary human."

"Yeah, right," said Oruki, obviously not believing what Koizumi said. "Are there any other weirdoes you haven't told us about?"

"Technically, myself, Nagato-san and Asahina-san are merely representatives or our own respective factions. I am a member of an Organization that consists of other espers and supporters. Nagato is only one of many of her kind that live on our planet, and I'm also quite sure that the people from the future have sent other agents besides Asahina-san. However, only the three of us, plus Kyon-kun and Suzumiya-san are officially a part of the club called the SOS Brigade."

"Speaking of my daughter," said Oruki as he marched up to Koizumi and poked a figure into his chest in an intimidating fashion. "What the hell does any of this have to do with her?!"

Koizumi's smile grew even more, obviously showing no signs of intimidation at all. "Your daughter is without a doubt the most important part in all of this."

"Go on," said Oruki, eagerly anticipating the explanation.

Koizumi continued his explanation, slowly beginning to pace around us. "You see, whether you realize it or not, your daughter is a very special person and is of extreme importance for all three of our respective factions. The reason for this is that your daughter has an absolutely incredible power."

"Power?" asked Oruki, looking somewhat baffled. "What kind of power?"

"Our three respective factions disagree on the very nature of her power and how it manifests, but we all agree on this. She has the ability to alter reality to her whims and desires."

Oruki continued to glare at Koizumi in disbelief while Naru-san appeared completely at awe from the revelation.

"I'm sure Nagato-san and Asahina-san could better explain their theories and beliefs about the nature of Suzumiya-san's powers than I could, so it's probably best if I don't go into detail about what they believe. However, the theory that the Organization that I work for currently holds is that your daughter is, quite literally, God or something close to it. She's isn't aware of her powers, though, nor is she aware of the true nature of myself, Nagato-san and Asahina-san and our respective factions."

"Hold on a minute!" yelled Oruki, shaking his head in disbelief. "Maybe I can buy this garbage that you're an esper and that girl is some sort of alien… thing. But now you're telling me that my daughter is God? What a load of crap! I've been living with my daughter her whole life. If she really had this kind of power you're talking about, don't you think we would have noticed something by now?"

Koizumi continued to give Oruki that annoying smile of his. "Haven't you?"

Oruki was a bit taken aback by the question. I watched as he stuttered, obviously thinking back to the past to try and remember anything unusual before responding.

I took the liberty to ask him a question. "Do you remember ever having a strange feeling of déjà vu during the last two weeks of last August?"

Oruki raised an eyebrow at me. "I don't know. That was a long while ago."

I noticed Naru-san also thinking about my question, trying hard to remember. Her face suddenly beamed brightly as she turned to Oruki, obviously remembering something. "I remember now! Oruki-kun, do you remember those couple weeks where you were able to guess the exact scores of every baseball game you watched. That was the last two weeks of August wasn't it? I remember you raving about it every time it happened."

"Yeah…" said Oruki as he continued to think. "I remember that… now that I think about it, I do remember feeling déjà vu a lot during those two weeks." He then looked at Koizumi. "But what does that have to do with my daughter?"

"During that two week period at the end of August, the universe had been stuck in a nearly endless recursion of time. Those same two weeks repeated themselves over and over, and anyone who was close to Suzumiya-san, yourselves included, were likely to experience remnants contained within their memories of those past recursions of time."

"Wait, you mean my daughter made those two weeks repeat themselves?" asked Oruki. "How many times did that happen?"

"15,498 times," answered Nagato.

"What?!" exclaimed Oruki, both he and his wife completely taken aback by the large number. "Why the hell would she do that?"

I reluctantly answered. "Uh… because I never completed my summer homework…"

Oruki looked at me with complete incredulity. "You're kidding, right?"

"I wish I was."

Oruki turned his eyes away from me and began to blink, completely at a loss for word. He then rubbed him face for a bit before speaking again. "I'm still not buying it. It's impossible!"

"I'm sure other strange things have happened to you guys," I said. "Just think about it."

Naru-san seemed to remember something. "Ooo, remember that time a couple years ago when Haru-chan wanted to make a snowman? And then we got more than 30 centimeters of snow the next day, but it only landed in our neighborhood."

"That was a coincidence," said Oruki.

"But it was in the middle of June."

"Do you remember reading about how the cherry blossoms bloomed in the middle of last autumn?" I asked. "That was Haruhi."

Naru-san remembered something else. "Remember when Haru-chan wanted a puppy and you told her no, and then we had all the stray dogs in our neighborhood bark at our front door until they were all captured and taken away?"

"The fact that you hurt yourself every time Haruhi is mad at you isn't a coincidence," I said. "I can guarantee you that."

"Oh, and then there was this time when Haru-chan wanted us to buy this blue colored drink at the store and you said no. And then later that day this blue colored stuff kept coming out of our faucet all day." Naru-san then giggled a bit before continuing. "I thought some poison had gotten into our water system or something, but now it all makes sense. Now that I think about, I can't believe I didn't figure this out sooner."

They do say that hindsight is 20/20. However, I started to remember something that Koizumi told me about Haruhi's parents. There was a reason why they'd never realized what was happening sooner. The

reason was that the both of them were hardcore realists, just like their daughter. It's likely that strange things had been happening around them for years, and they'd always found a way to try and rationalize all of it. Never once would they have ever had guessed that their daughter was behind all of it.

Koizumi continued to explain to them reasons for why all of us were in the club together and what each of the three faction wanted with Haruhi. He told them about how we all had to do our part to make sure that Haruhi never became bored or angry, as these emotions could potentially lead to the destruction of the world. He also explained how Haruhi apparently recreated the world about four years ago, because she wanted aliens, time-travelers and espers to exist and as a result, they did in fact come into being. Ultimately, it was a lot of information for the two of them to take in, and I could see that it was taking its toll on them, especially Oruki.

Eventually, Oruki began to rub his face, looking very defeated. The even despite the bluish tint that he had around him, I could tell that his face had drained slightly in color. He looked to me with one last question. "There's one thing I don't understand. What do you have to do with all this?"

I answered him the best I could. "To be honest, I'm not really sure. Like you, I guess you could say I'm a bit of a bystander… no… I'm more than that now. For whatever reason, Haruhi made me join her club, and since then, I've been heavily involved with pretty much everything that involves your daughter and all the weirdness that seems to follow her."

Satisfied with my answer, Oruki then turned away from me and rested his arms on a nearby self. He then buried his face in his arms, as if trying to escape this madness that had forced its way into what used to be an ordinary life.

Naru-san had a light giggling fit. "I always knew our daughter was special, but not 'this' special…" She then giggled again.

"There is one last thing we must discuss before we are done," said Koizumi, his face becoming serious again. "As we've said before, your daughter is completely unaware of what is happening around her and is ignorant of her power. We would like to make sure that she remains that way."

Oruki quickly lifted his head and looked at Koizumi. "What? Are you saying that we need to keep our mouths shut? Forget it!" He then began to walk towards him while pointing his finger directly at his face. "I'm going to tell her everything!"

An incredible amount of fear and dread rose up in my chest when I heard this. I looked to Nagato. I could see her lifting her arm, obviously preparing to do that memory wiping thing. I quickly put my hands up towards her to stop her. "Wait! Hold on!" I then turned to Oruki in a desperate attempt to change his mind. "You can't do that!"

"Why the hell not?!"

"Think about it. You should know your daughter better than almost anyone. What do you think would happen if she were to know about her powers? Do you honestly think that if she knew she could manipulate the fabric of reality that she wouldn't abuse that power? I'd be surprised if anyone in the entire universe could have that power without it eventually corrupting them. You have to believe me that for the sake of the universe, she must never find out."

"But…" Oruki continued to try and find a response to what I said, but I could tell that he really had none. Eventually, he turned away from me and buried his face in his hands. "I give up…"

Feeling relieved, I then turned to Koizumi and Nagato. "Is there anything else we need to tell them?"

"I believe we've covered all the basics," said Koizumi. "I'll be honest, I'm a little worried that this might've have been a bad idea, but I guess we won't know until later as to what may happen."

I then turned to Nagato. "Can we go now? To be honest, this place gives me the creeps."

Nagato nodded and lifted her hand out. She began to chant away again inaudibly. This time, it only took a mere three seconds before we were hit with a bright light. Soon after that, we were back in the store room, and the smell of the rotten plant matter wafted back in our noses. Any and all damage that was done to the ceiling, walls and floors completely disappeared. To my chagrin, even Koizumi's suit was repaired. As an added bonus, any injuries both Koizumi and I received were now gone, as if we'd slept at an inn in one of those RPGs. Yep, Nagato really is amazing. Unfortunately, all the stains that I received after digging through the rotten produce earlier were still there. I don't know how I'll ever clean those out.

Only seconds later, my cell phone went off. When I looked at it, I saw it was Haruhi. I then quickly answered it. "Hello?"

"Where the hell have you been?! I've been trying to reach you forever!"

Great, now I'm in trouble. She obviously couldn't get a hold of me while we were in that super-analog place. "Sorry… I must have been standing in a dead zone or something."

"What the hell have you guys been up to?! You better not have been goofing off!"

"Nope, we weren't. In fact, your parents have been here watching us the whole time."

"Figures. I knew they were up to something. Well at least you guys were trying to be productive. We tried to get inside to building of the supplier, but security came and kicked us out. I was going to try and find another way in, but every door except the front one is locked. I haven't been able to question anyone about anything."

I was actually a bit relieved that she didn't get into anymore trouble than she did. Well, guess it's time to tell her the good news. "Well, there's no need for that. I've got good news. We figured out what was causing the produce to rot."

"Oh my god! Really?! Awesome! You guys wait right there! We'll be back as soon as possible! You better be ready to explain everything!" I then could hear her screaming cheerfully and loudly, obviously overjoyed to know that we were able to solve the mystery. No doubt in her mind that her club was saved. She then hung up.

"Well, she'll be back soon," I said after giving a sigh of relief. I then turned to Oruki with a question in mind. "If you don't mind me asking, why did you two come back? Haruhi told me that you guys were going home."

Oruki sighed deeply, reluctant to answer. "… Before we left, I noticed you talking to those two. Also noticed that Mr. Smiles over there had stopped smiling, and that the girl, who hadn't spoken a single word since we met her this morning, was finally talking. I got suspicious when I saw that, and I thought that the three of you were up to something. I thought at first that maybe you guys were the ones really behind this whole thing and that this was all a set up. So I tried to have Naru and I sneak up on you when you weren't expecting it to see if you were really were up to something."

That figures. Once again, Oruki's keen senses and instincts picked up on something suspicious. I should have been more subtle when I started talking to the both of them earlier. I didn't like the fact that he thought this whole thing was a setup, though. I mean, sure we were going to create a fake mystery if this one hadn't shown up, but still…

I then turned to the others. "So how are we going to explain to Haruhi and Morimura-san as to what caused the produce to rot?"

"You leave that to me," said Koizumi. "I have an idea…"

Haruhi, Asahina-san and Morimura-san had all returned. We were all standing opposite of Koizumi, who was now holding onto two bottles of cleaner. One was a floor cleaner and the other was an all-purpose cleaner. I waited with baited breath as to what Koizumi's explanation was going to be. Moments before the others came back, Koizumi asked Nagato if she could tell which cleaning products were the ones used the most by Morimura-san. Obviously, he was going to put the blame on these two harmless looking products.

"As you can see here, I'm holding onto two different types of cleaning products. On the surface, they appear to be your standard, ordinary cleaning chemicals. Believe it or not, we've determined that these are the cause of what was ruining your produce." I could see the looks of disbelief on Haruhi's and Morimura-san's face as he continued to explain. "By themselves, these products are harmless as long as they are used properly. However, it turns out that the active ingredients in both of these products react to each other if they come into contact. This chemical reaction results in the formation of a new chemical agent that is released into the air. That chemical then damages and eventually destroys the cellular structure of any plant material it comes in contact with."

Morimura-san appeared confused when he heard this. "I don't understand. I've been using those products for years. I've never had any problems before."

"Indeed," said Koizumi. "However, it's very likely that you've been careful not to have both of these products come into contact with each other. After all, one is a floor cleaner while the other is an all purpose cleaner. If used properly, they shouldn't come into contact with one another. However, it possible that the last time you cleaned the storeroom before Friday that you may have spilled some of the all-purpose cleaner on the floor."

Morimura-san began to think, trying to remember if he did. "I'm not sure. I think maybe I did."

"And that's what started it," said Koizumi. "I'm also guessing that you used these products again when you started to realize the problem. Am I right?"

Morimura-san nodded. "I did. I cleaned this place from top to bottom using those cleaners. Maybe I got more of it on the floor when I did."

"And thus you exacerbated the problem. I would recommend that you clean your storeroom from top to bottom with regular soap and water, and that you air out your storeroom for a day. Once you do that, I'm certain that the problem will be solved. I would also recommend that you change the products that you use as well."

With that, Morimura-san began to smile, feeling incredibly relieved to know that the nightmare was finally over. I looked at Haruhi, too. I could tell she was thinking about whether Koizumi's explanation made any real sense. I knew she was smart, so I was worried she might figure out that his explanation was a bunch of crap. Ultimately, she smiled, too, perhaps deciding that it wasn't worth questioning whether it was possible for two cleaning products to react that way. It was then that Morimura-san turned to Haruhi.

"How could I ever repay you for all that you've done?"

Haruhi smiled proudly before answering. "Repayment is unnecessary. It was a lot of fun helping you solve this mystery. Although, if you really must repay us, you can just help sponsor the sequel to our movie, and we can call it even."

"I would be more than happy to," said Morimura-san, nearly in tears.

Haruhi then turned to her father. "Are you satisfied?"

It took a moment for Oruki to realize that she was talking to him. "Oh… uh… yeah. Fine… whatever. Do what you want."

It was then that Haruhi cheered loudly in excitement. The nightmare was over. The SOS Brigade was saved. "Great work everyone! This

calls for a celebration! My mom told me yesterday that if we were successful in solving this mystery that she'd bake us a cake! Let's go back to my place and party our brains out!"

And with that, we all made our way back to the Suzumiya residence. Once again, I was forced to sit in the back of Oruki's car with Haruhi and Asahina-san while Morimura-san was nice enough to drive Nagato and Koizumi back. I noticed on the way back that Naru-san would occasionally turn around and look back at her daughter before she would go into a giggling fit. I suddenly began to worry. I remembered the fact that she was really bad at keeping secrets. I was going to have to watch her carefully. Oruki, on the other hand, tried as hard as possible not to look at his daughter. I could tell that this whole ordeal had disturbed him greatly, and it would likely be a while before it all sunk in.

When we all returned, Naru-san got busy making both the cake and dinner. While she was doing that, the Brigade hung out in the living room, watching movies, playing games on the game system they owned, goofing off and the what not. After such a terrible week, it was really nice to finally let loose and relax. While we were having fun, however, Haruhi made an announcement.

"As you all know, the events of the last week prevented us from being able to spend time on Brigade activities. As a result, we have a lot of catching up to do with all the time we lost. So as to not waste anymore time, we're going to have another city-wide search tomorrow, at nine A.M sharp! It's been way too long since the last time we've done one. It's totally unacceptable! Thanks a lot, Kyon! It's all your fault!"

Hey, it is not my fault. We missed the city-wide search last week because you wanted to come with me on my search for apartments instead. And we missed the week before because you were helping me move out of my house… and into yours. She is right about one thing, though. It's been too long. It's been about three weeks since our last one.

Shortly after Haruhi made that announcement, dinner was served. It was European night, so Naru-san made a large roast that was enough for everyone to eat. The cake was finished shortly after we got done with dinner. Naru-san even went through the trouble to write "Congratulations on a mystery solved!" on it before we ate. As usual, Haruhi was a pig and ate way more cake than she deserved. Not that I really cared. I was in way too good a mood for it to bother me..

During all this, Oruki was strangely aloof, cooping himself in his room the whole time. I never figured him to be the sociable type anyway, especially with teenagers, but I was certainly worried about his behavior. What was he going to do when he got over the shock? I knew I was going to have to keep an eye on him as well…

Shortly after we were all done eating, Nagato, Koizumi and Asahina-san bid us farewell and left. Haruhi and I continued playing games on the game system for a while longer after that (which basically meant I got my butt kicked over and over again) before Haruhi eventually shut the system down and passed out on the couch. I was surprised at first to see her pass out so fast, but then I remembered that Haruhi had slept very poorly all week and was likely many hours behind on her sleep debt. Feeling a bit bad for her, I decided to take the liberty of picking her up and carrying her to her room.

After I had placed her on her bed, I stared at her for a while, watching her breathe rhythmically. Whether I liked to admit it or not, it was hard to keep my eyes off her while she slept. She was a beautiful girl. It was with this realization that I was reminded of last Saturday night when Haruhi snuck into my room and kissed me while I was "asleep". I swallowed hard when I also made the realization that I was becoming increasingly tempted to return the favor. I began to lean in towards her face, coming closer and closer until I feel her breath on my face again. My heart began to race again in the anxious anticipation of what I was about to do.

I was mere centimeters away from kissing her when I suddenly stopped myself. I suddenly started asking myself what the hell I was

doing. Kissing girls in their sleep was definitely something that didn't sit well with me. It went against my principles. Not only that, there was also the fact that this was Haruhi. Why the hell did I want to kiss her? What was I thinking? It was then that I decided against kissing her. After all, I'm not Haruhi. Kissing people in their sleep was not my style. I instead decide to lean into her ear and whisper something.

"We did it, Haruhi. We saved the SOS Brigade. I told you we would, didn't I? Let's have fun tomorrow, okay? Good night, Haruhi…"

I pulled the covers over her after that. I then got up and began to slowly walk out the door. Before I left her room, I looked back at her one last time and smiled. I didn't know if she heard me while she was sleeping, but I hoped she did. I then left her room and closed her door before going to my room and getting ready for bed. No doubt we were going to have a busy day tomorrow.

I was actually looking forward to it…

Finally it's done!!! I have to apologize again for having it take so long. Stupid computer. :(

I have a favor to ask you guys, and it's a shameless one, especially after such a long delay. Anyway, I was hoping that as many of you could review as possible. I know I've never asked this of you before, but I'm doing this because I'm getting really close to surpassing "The Melancholy of Kyon" in the shear number of reviews. I really, REALLY want to surpass that story. It know it's a lot to ask, and I won't be too upset of you ignore my request, but damn I want the top spot bad! :P

Anyway, I hoped you enjoyed the chapter. I'll try not to have the next one take a week and a half to come. See ya later!

Chapter 15

I want to thank everyone for giving an overwhelming amount of reviews! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! We're almost there, so don't stop now, okay?!

The next couple chapters will have a lot more Kyon/Haruhi goodness, and not just because you asked for it. I was planning on doing this anyway, since I knew that the last few chapters didn't have a lot of romance scenes in them.

I apologize for any mistakes you might find. I had to rush the proof-reading, today. Please state any corrections you can find and I'll correct them as soon as possible.

Anyway, Hope you enjoy the chapter.

Chapter 15

You know what? I slept like a baby last night. In fact, it was the first time in a short while that I passed out right away. I had some nice dreams, too… too bad my memories of them had faded, with the exception of one.

It had the entire SOS Brigade together again, but this time we were in some weird blue and green colored van. We were all dressed in some weird 70's styled clothing. I was wearing a green shirt with brown bell bottoms. Koizumi was wearing a white shirt with blue pants and an orange ascot tie. Nagato had her glasses again, but they were huge and rectangle-shaped. She also had an orange sweater and skirt. Asahina-san wore this really cute lavender dress with purple stockings. And finally… there was Haruhi. What was she wearing? Believe it or not, she was cosplaying as a dog-girl. Don't ask me why. It was too bizarre.

Anyway, the five of us were out on the road solving mysteries. We eventually stopped at some hotel that was being terrorized by some kind of kappa. Not wanting to miss a chance to get to the bottom of this newest mystery, we set out to the inner depths of this hotel. During the course of trying to solve the mystery, our group eventually split up, and for some reason, I was paired with Haruhi. Normally, I probably would've loathed being paired with her, but for some reason I found the dog costume she wore to be surprisingly appealing (and not just because it was also somewhat revealing).

During our search for clues, we were attacked by the kappa several times. Each time, Haruhi and I would have to try and find some way to out smart the creature to get away. Along the way, we raided the kitchen of the hotel and made huge sandwiches which were both eaten by Haruhi before I could even take a bite. I even remember having to give her some kind of dog-treat at some point before she started smelling the ground for clues. I had to admit that watching her do this was very amusing.

Eventually, through a series of wild mishaps, we finally caught the kappa and were finally going to unmask it to find out who it really was. Unfortunately, this is where the dream ended, because I suddenly felt strong vibrations coming from a spot right next to me. I then felt another coming from a different location of the bed. This happened a few more times before I felt something heavy land right on my back.

My face was buried in the pillow at the time, so my scream of pain was muffled. However, I could no longer ignore the vibrations that came from different spots on my bed. Eventually figured out what they were then I felt something heavy land on my back again. No doubt that this was Haruhi, and she was jumping on my bed to wake me up, occasionally landing on me on purpose.

"Damn you, Kyon! Wake up! Don't think that just because the Brigade is no longer in jeopardy that you can just slack off! What the hell's the matter with you?! You had no problem waking up before me the last three days!"

Go away! I want to go back to sleep and find out who the kappa was! The mystery was almost solved, dammit!

It was then that Haruhi jumped up really high and slammed into my back with her shoulder.

"OW! Dammit! That hurt!"

"That's your punishment for being lazy, Kyon!" She then sat up and swung her leg to the other side of my body. "Giddy up horsey!" She even went and pulled on the collar of my shirt as if it were reins.

"Get off me! I'm not a horse!"

Haruhi pulled on my collar harder, enough to start to choke me. "Damn you! I said Giddy up! Up! Now!"

I reluctantly agreed and started to lift her while getting on my hands and knees. When I was younger, I used to do this kind of thing for my sister a lot, but my sister was just a little kid back then and not at all a seventeen year old. I didn't know which was worse, the fact that I was being completely dominated in this position or the fact that Haruhi was immature enough to still think this was fun.

By some miracle, I was able to get off my bed without falling on my face and slowly made it towards my door. Haruhi continuously pulled on my collar to egg me to go faster.

"Ow, stop it! That's enough. Get off!"

"Quiet! Horseys don't talk!"

I eventually made it to the hall, leaving what little self-respect I still had in my room.

"Faster, horsey! Faster! You're going too slow!"

She even had the nerve to slap me in the butt while riding me. Dammit, that's not okay! You definitely do not have permission to do

that!

"Quiet horsey! Move it! Down the stairs!"

You want me to go down the stairs like this? I'll fall on my face for sure.

During all this, I noticed that we were about to pass back the bedroom that belonged to Haruhi's parents. I begged and pleaded with the heavens that neither one of them would come out of their room and see me like this.

Of course I can never be lucky enough to avoid humiliation. A second later, Naru-san opened the door and walked out. She immediately saw us and stared at us for a few seconds before she started to crack up. Oh man. Shoot me now. This horse is lame and needs to die.

"Oh my, that looks fun!" said Naru-san cheerfully. "Can I join, too?"

No! Please don't! I'm being tortured enough!

To my chagrin, Naru-san went and got on my back, too. The combined weight of the both of them was now unbearable, and I was only able to go a couple feet before I collapsed in exhaustion.

"Get up, horsey! No slacking!"

Please… get off… can't breathe…

After giving a loud huff, Haruhi finally got off of me, followed by her mother. "Stupid Kyon! You're the worst horsey ever!"

Thanks. Can I have my dignity back, please?

Thankfully, Naru-san was a little more considerate of my condition. "Are you alright, Kyon-kun?"

Do I even have to answer that?

Naru-san was nice enough to help me up off the floor. "There we go. Sorry if I hurt you."

Oh Naru-san, why couldn't you have passed down your kindness and consideration to your daughter? Or perhaps you did, and it's just buried under all of your husband's brass insensitivity. Yeah, that must be it…

Naru-san promised to make breakfast for us while we got ourselves ready. I let Haruhi take her shower first. While I waited on her, I went ahead and picked out my outfit for the day. I heard that today was going to be a scorcher, so I decided on something light since I knew I would out in the sun all day.

Eventually, the both of us got finished getting washed and dressed. We then went to the kitchen to see what Naru-san cooked up. She made some egg sandwiches with sausage and cheese, similar to those sandwiches made that fast food places except way better. I was about half-way done with my first sandwich when I noticed that Oruki still hadn't come down for breakfast.

"What's up with your husband? Doesn't he usually get up at the same time you do?"

"Oruki-kun isn't feeling well today," said Naru-san with a weak smile. "He needed to rest a bit longer."

No doubt he probably still didn't want to look his daughter in the face. I was really hoping he wasn't going to try and avoid her forever. He had to come to terms with the truth eventually, right?

I was roused from my thoughts when Naru-san asked a question. "Are you two going out somewhere today?"

"We're meeting up with the rest of our club downtown," answered Haruhi. "It's not enough for us to simply solve other people's mysteries. We must also go out and seek our own mysteries as well."

"That sounds like an awful lot of fun," said Naru-san with a pout. "I sure wish I could come."

"Sowwy mom," said Haruhi with a mouthful of sandwich. Can't you swallow before speaking? "But city wid searches ar fo Bigad members ony."

I facepalmed at Haruhi's manners. I just hoped that today wouldn't be a disaster.

When we finally finished our breakfast, we headed out for yet another of our city wide searches. As we made the trek down the streets, I was pleased to find that the air was still relatively cool. The trek was mostly downhill, too, which made it all the better in my opinion. Haruhi had made it a point to be ahead of me when we left, and she was walking at a slightly brisker pace than me. At first, I figured she was just being her usual take-charge self, but I noticed she would occasionally look behind her shoulder at me. I was confused at this at first, especially when her pace started to get faster and faster. Eventually, she was at a jog.

"Hey stop!" I yelled. "You're going to fast!"

"I won't be the last one!" she yelled as she then took off in a full sprint.

I then figured it out. She was trying to make sure that she wasn't the last one to show up to the meeting. I guess the rule of "whoever shows up last has to pay for everyone else" still applies. I reluctantly took off after her with the faint hope that I would be able to catch up to her…

I don't know why I even bothered to try. No matter how hard I pumped my legs and arms, I couldn't close the distance between myself and Haruhi. What made things worse was the fact that her stamina was better than mine. I wasn't able to chase her more than a few blocks before I was quickly tiring out and losing ground. Fortunately, by the time this happened we were almost there. Still, I

unfortunately lost to her when we got there. And guess what. Nagato, Koizumi and Asahina-san were already there before us. Just once, I'd like to see one of them late. Why can't that ever happen?

I hunched over to try and regain my breath when we arrived. I looked at Haruhi, who was also trying to catch her breath too, but she wasn't nearly as winded as I was.

"Too bad, Kyon! You're late again!"

Oh boy, I'm late by a whole two seconds. Yay…

"And as you already know, being late means you're being charged with a penalty."

I guess some things never change. I secretly wondered what that penalty could be. Surely she knew I didn't have any money I could spend by now. Honestly, though, I was getting sick of not being able to use my money for anything. I have 40,000 yen burning a hole in my pocket, and I can't freaking spend it. It's maddening!

As usual, we made our way into the café that we always met at before we spilt up. Everyone ordered their drinks before Haruhi began her usual pre-search speech.

"As you all know, it's been a while since the last time we did this, so I want everyone to know that we must take extra effort to keep an eye out for the extraordinary!"

You say that, but we all know you're not really being serious. We always end up goofing off on these stupid searches anyway.

Haruhi did her usual ritual of picking five toothpicks and marking two of them. "Okay, get ready to pick. Concentrate on your destiny!"

How is concentrating supposed to affect what toothpick we pick? I'm sure as hell that it won't work with me.

Asahina-san, Koizumi and Nagato picked first. I was about to pick too, but just before I did, I noticed that Koizumi and Nagato already had marked toothpicks, making the act of picking a toothpick myself pointless. I sighed inwardly when I realized this. I had secretly hoped that I wouldn't get paired up with Haruhi. To be honest, I was hoping for a break from her. Guess that wouldn't happen. Oh well, it's not all bad. At least I'm also paired with Asahina-san, too. Her bubbling energy should be enough to perk me up.

"Okay, now that it's decided, we better not waste anymore time," said Haruhi while holding her drink in the air. "Finish up quickly! We have a lot of searching to do!"

Shortly afterward, we received the bill, which caused a moment of awkwardness between us. Technically, according to our rules, I had to pay. So if I couldn't pay, what would happen instead?

"Don't worry about it, Kyon," said Haruhi as she reached into her purse.

"What do you mean 'don't worry about it.' I know you. You're going to make me pay ten fold in some other way."

"Duh," said Haruhi rudely. "Rules are rules. If you can't pay in one way, I'll make you pay in another."

At this point, I realized that I really didn't want to find out how she was going to make me repay her. It was then that I made a decision that I would soon regret. "Forget it. I'll pay."

Haruhi blinked in surprised. "I thought you had to save your money."

"It's fine," I said as I pulled out my wallet. "It's not a big deal." I then proceeded to pay the bill, and we all left to parts unknown. I guess I could always sell my bike if I had to. It's not like I really use it anymore.

While my group decided to march off to the north side of town, Koizumi and Nagato were sent to "search" the south side. I knew that I was going to be bored out of my mind today. Why? Because when you have Haruhi and Asahina-san together in a group during our city-wide searches, this usually meant one thing. Window shopping. And being a typical guy, it was one of the last things I wanted to do.

Back in the day when we first started these searches, the idea of window shopping would have likely completely repulsed Haruhi, but as time progressed, she slowly gave in to the fact that she really was the kind of girl that enjoyed this kind of thing. In fact, if you were watching her right now without knowing a thing about her, you'd probably think she was like any other girl. I guess it wasn't that bad that she was like this. It just gives me nothing to do when she and Asahina-san entered a store.

During our travels in the local mall, Haruhi stopped briefly to use the bathroom, which gave me the opportunity to talk to Asahina-san about yesterday. I didn't get a chance to do so before since Haruhi was constantly around.

"Asahina-san. Do you know about what happened with Haruhi's parents?" I continued after she lightly nodded. "I'm a little worried that perhaps I made a mistake in letting them learn the truth. I mean, didn't you say yourself that they weren't supposed to find out?"

"Not exactly," said Asahina-san with a really cute smile. "What I said was that at the 'present-time' that they couldn't know. It was Wednesday when I said that."

"So you already knew that they were going to find out everything only days later, right?" Before she even opened her mouth, I interrupted. "Wait… let me guess… classified information?"

Asahina-san gave a guilty looking smile. "I'm sorry…"

I sighed inwardly just before Haruhi exited from the bathroom, yelling at us to continue on.

Eventually, the three of us entered a women's clothing store, much to my embarrassment. If any girls are reading this, please do us guys a favor. Don't take us to these places. It's incredibly uncomfortable for us… really. Standing in the middle of this place, I couldn't help but feel like every other girl in the store was staring at me, thinking that I'm either a stalker or that I have a penchant for cross-dressing.

I had to wait for Haruhi and Asahina-san as those two tried on some new outfits. It was probably only 15 minutes that I had to wait, but it felt like an eternity. I was relieved when they finally exited the changing room so I could see what they put on.

They were both wearing sleeveless dresses that were exactly the same, except that Haruhi's was yellow with sunflowers on it and Asahina-san was wearing pink with white roses.

"How do we look?" asked Haruhi with a bright smile.

"You both look great in that," I said. They really did. I relished Asahina-san's slight embarrassment when I said that. It's so damn cute.

Haruhi paused, as if she was almost disappointed with what I said. "And?"

"That's it. What else do you want me to say?"

Haruhi had a mild look of annoyance on her face before she grabbed Asahina-san by the wrist. "Let's try something else."

And once again, the two of them picked something out and went back into the changing while I was left contemplating what the hell I said wrong. I facepalmed as I continued to wait for those two to finish dressing.

Haruhi and Asahina-san once again exited the dressing room. This time they were both dressed in red and white halter tops respectively with short denim skirts. I noticed that Haruhi's smile was slightly more toned down this time.

"What do you think now?"

"Great. You both look fantastic."

Haruhi continued to glare at me, making me feel a bit nervous. I noticed Asahina-san getting increasingly nervous as well. What the hell does Haruhi want me to say? Would she be happier if I said she looked like crap? Did I not praise her enough? These were my thoughts as Haruhi grabbed Asahina-san again by the wrist and picked something else out.

It was at this point that they continued to try on new outfits. Each time they finished getting dressed, they would come out and show me and I would tell them how great they both looked. And as a result, Haruhi would become more and more irritated and force Asahina-san to find something else to wear. I noticed Asahina-san's anxiety was also steadily increasing with every trip back to the changing room. What the hell is wrong with Haruhi today?

Finally, the two of them had put on what was going to be the last outfit. I almost didn't want to respond at this point, knowing that I was going to piss her off even more. When asked again how they looked, Haruhi was no longer smiling. Her frustration was obvious and so was mine.

"Look, you both look great. What else do you want to say? Do you think I'm lying or something?"

Haruhi stared daggers at me one last time before turning around and heading to the changing room. "I'm done. Let's go." Asahina-san then reluctantly followed suit, and soon the both of them were back in what they were wearing before they came here, never bothering to purchase anything.

Haruhi made an announcement as soon as we walked out of the store. "We're going to the school real quick. I left something there that I need to grab."

"What could you have possibly left at the school that's so important that you can't wait until tomorrow to get it?"

"You'll see when we get there!"

"You do realize that the school's closed right now, right?"

"That doesn't matter! Don't waste my time with unimportant details!"

I'm pretty sure it's damn important. After all, the fact that you're going to trespass on school property during the weekend could mean that all three of us could get into serious trouble.

Of course, all of this mattered little to our Brigade Chief. For whatever reason, she felt it was imperative to break into the school on a weekend and grab something she forgot. What the hell could it be anyway? It's probably something in the clubroom, but what? I certainly don't remember her leaving anything important there. In fact, we haven't even been in that room since last Monday before Haruhi was banned from her club. If there was anything so important in there, couldn't she have gotten it last week when no one was in there?

Ultimately, I knew that none of my questions would be answered until we got there, if at all. I'd hoped beyond hope that all the doors would be locked, and Haruhi would be forced to give up on whatever she was planning. Then again, we're dealing with someone who can alter reality at a whim. It would just be my luck that one of the doors would just happen to be unlocked.

Soon we arrived at our destination, quite a distance away from our original designated search location. I watch hopelessly as Haruhi went up to each door one at a time and pulled on it. Fortunately, all of the front doors were locked tight. Thanks god for that.

Haruhi's frustration was beyond obvious. "Dammit! There must be a way inside. Maybe we can break a window."

"We're not going to damage school property just so you can grab whatever it is that you think is so damn important," I said as sternly as I could, hoping to deter her from her crazy mission. It's a bit rare, but every once in a while I'm able to influence her into not doing something incredibly stupid and illegal.

Haruhi reaction was less than amused. She stared heatedly at me for a half a minute before storming off around the building. "I'm not leaving until I try every door!"

And so Asahina-san and I continued to follow Haruhi while she walked the perimeter of the building, trying every door she could find. At first, it appeared that all the doors were in fact locked, and I was starting to feel a bit relieved. Unfortunately, when we got to the doors that lead directly into the athletic field, Haruhi found one that wasn't properly locked. Great…

"There we go," said Haruhi smugly. "Come on you two! Inside!"

"Why do we have to go in with you? Can't you grab whatever you need by yourself?"

"I said get inside!" yelled Haruhi. "That's a direct order!"

"S… Suzumiya-san…" said Asahina-san weakly. "I… I really don't want to get in trouble…"

"It's fine, Mikuru-chan," said Haruhi as she grabbed the red-head by the arm and rushed her inside. "We're just going to the clubroom to do something real quick. We're not going to vandalize or steal anything."

I'm pretty sure breaking and entering is a crime regardless of the perpetrator's motives. And if we do get caught, do you know what's going to happen? Your father's going to be pissed. And guess who

he's going to blame? Me! And do you know what he'll do after that? He's going to kill me! Do you even care?! Dammit, I want to live… who am I kidding? We're going through with this anyway… It's not like this is our first time doing this… Wait a minute! Did she say that we're here to do something? I thought we were just grabbing something. What that hell is she up to?

By the time I had finished with my internal monologue, we were at the door to the clubroom. The first thing Haruhi did was stare at the note she had left on the door last week when she was banned from the club, announcing that Brigade activities were suspended until further notice. Obviously, this thing had to go. So Haruhi did the reasonable thing and began to rip the note into smaller and smaller piece. The grin on her face while she did this had an almost sadistic look of pleasure as she ripped it into pieces so small that they could no longer be ripped by human hands. It must've been quite therapeutic for her, but couldn't she at least have done this over a garbage can? Now there was paper all over the floor.

After she was done with making an unnecessary mess, she grabbed Asahina-san by the arm again and turned to me while opening the door. "Stay outside until I tell you!" She then dragged the near frightened senior into the room and closed the door.

I stood there completely baffled. What in all that is sane is she doing? It wasn't long before I heard audible screams coming from Asahina-san, indicating that she was forcefully being undressed. I facepalmed when I realized this. I had a rather strong urge to run away. I knew that none of this was going to lead to anything good. I decided that while I waited for those two to get done with whatever they were doing to try and clean up all the paper that was all over the floor. I wasn't able to collect it all, as there were too many little pieces everywhere, but I figured as long as most of the pieces were picked up it would be fine.

Just as I was getting done, I heard Haruhi yell for me to come in. I swallowed hard, dreading whatever she had in store for me. I reluctantly grabbed the doorknob and slowly opened the door…

I found both Haruhi and Asahina-san dressed in none other than their trademark bunny costumes… You've got to be kidding me. It all hit me like a ton of bricks. I remembered now that I had lied to Haruhi about what Asahina-san was talking to me about when she called me last Thursday evening. I told her that Asahina-san asked me who looked better in the bunny costume, and I said I didn't know. Haruhi insisted that I answer the question. She even bugged me about it a bit the next day, but I refused to answer. I also realized what was going on before in the clothing store. Haruhi was having the both of them put on similar outfits to find out which one looked better in them. And of course I kept saying they were both great rather than picking one over the other. I guess now I have no choice but to put this matter to rest.

"Well, Kyon!" said Haruhi with her hands on her hips. "Get a good look at us right now and make your decision. I demand complete and total honesty from you. No more excuses!"

Was this really necessary?! You break into the school and torment Asahina-san for this?! What were you thinking?!

I looked at Asahina-san, who was almost in tears at this point. I'm so sorry, Asahina-san. This is all my fault. I swear that I will do anything in my power to make this up to you after this is over. I'll even commit seppuku if you ask.

I began to get a good look at the both of them in their respective costumes. Haruhi even made the both of them turn around to get a better look at them. I suddenly realized that Haruhi was wearing a small ponytail while wearing the costume. Damn you, Haruhi! That's cheating!

"Well? Spit it out!" yelled Haruhi sternly.

Don't hurry me, dammit! It's hard enough to try and make a decision. Okay, let's try to make the comparison logically. No doubt that the both of them are stunningly beautiful. As a result, I needed to really think about this piece by piece. Obviously the chest is a good start.

Clearly, Asahina-san was better endowed than Haruhi. This was one of the main reasons why Haruhi picked her to be the Brigades mascot. I'm not truly a breast only person, though, so that shouldn't be the deciding factor. Well, I guess I'll move down to the hips and butt. Both are pretty even, but I think Haruhi might have a very subtle advantage, especially her butt. Man, I hate thinking about these things. It so uncomfortable to think about these two like this. I almost feel dirty.

"Hurry up!" yelled Haruhi, obviously losing patience.

Don't rush me! This isn't as easy as it looks. Okay, moving onto the legs. Both have some great legs. Asahina-san's legs were lean and slender while Haruhi were more tone and athletic. Damn this was hard. Can I go home now? And that damn ponytail of Haruhi's and Asahina-san cute whimpering weren't making this easier. Okay, so thinking this through isn't working. Instead, I'll count to five and then blurt whatever comes to mind and be done with it. Here we go… one… two… three… four… five… I can't do it!

I watched as Haruhi's face slowly turned from an annoyed scowl into extreme disappointment. It was becoming obvious that she was starting to leap to conclusions as to why I wasn't able to answer. "So that how it is. I get it." Before I could say anything, she stormed past me and exited the room. I called out her name to try and stop her, but she ignored me.

Great, just what I needed. This'll end well. I turned to Asahina-san to see if she was okay. "You alright?"

"I'm fine," said Asahina-san while wiping her eyes. "You need to go after her."

I nodded in agreement once I was satisfied that she was okay. I ran out the door to pursue Haruhi. Unfortunately, when I looked out into the hall, I didn't see where she went. Not good. Where'd she go? I began to run through the halls in my desperate search. I knew that I wouldn't have long before her emotional state would result in some

bad things happening. The best case scenario would be the creation of a close space, and hopefully not a world ending one. It hard to know sometimes just what's going on in that head of hers.

Searching the halls proved fruitless, so I started to think about where the best location to find her would be. I ultimately thought of two different places. She's either on the roof, or she's outside near that tree, the one she laid next to the day after that concert she did during the Culture Festival. Okay, which is more likely… think… I'll try the tree first. Of course, I could be wrong, and she's at neither place. That would suck…

Fortunately, my intuition was correct for a change, much to my relief. I saw her sitting on the grass by that very tree. By now, she'd taken off the bunny ears and undid the ponytail. She continued to sit there and sulk while I slowly approached her. When I came close, she turned her head to see that it was me.

"Go away! Leave me alone!"

"Hold on! Let me talk to you," I said in as soothing a tone as I could.

"About what?" asked Haruhi in a sour tone. "It's obvious that you like Mikuru-chan as a bunny better."

"About that… it's…" I tried my best to think of what to say to make her feel better. I knew if I told her she was the superior one, it would probably make her feel better, but wouldn't I be lying? I don't know.

"Stop trying to make me feel better," said Haruhi as she continued to sulk bitterly.

Why can't I just say it? Am I afraid that saying so will give her the wrong idea? I don't know. I already know that she has feelings for me for a while now. Obviously she really wanted me to pick her, but despite this, I get a sickly feeling in my stomach at the idea of just giving her what she wants. Am I an idiot?

As I continued to watch her stare at the grass, she would occasionally rip some of it out and toss some of it to the side. I then suddenly had a moment of clarity. Maybe I'm thinking about this the wrong way. This isn't about who was prettier or sexier or anything like that. It's way too hard to decide that without making me really uncomfortable. The question was "who was the better bunny girl?" In other words, this meant that I should also take personality into consideration, and when I take this into account, the answer came a lot easier. As cute and shy as Asahina-san is, I don't really think the bunny costume really suited her personality. Sure, she looked great wearing it, but it was always kinda awkward seeing her in it. The costume definitely suits someone with a more assertive personality better, and when I thought about it that way, Haruhi was the clear winner.

I was finally ready to answer. "Look Haruhi, the truth is… that… you're the better… bunny girl…"

Haruhi turned to me when I said that. "Really?" She then stood up and grabbed my shirt with both hands. "You're not just saying that to make me feel better, right?"

"I'm not," I said with a nervous smile. "I'm mean, sure Asahina-san looks good in the costume, too. But she's more of a maid or a nurse than a bunny girl. The bunny girl costume suits you way better. I… just didn't want to hurt Asahina-san's feelings. That's all."

Haruhi stared me down for about a minute before finally appearing satisfied with my answer. She grabbed the bunny ears and began to walk towards the door. "We should get going. We need to meet with the others soon."

I watched Haruhi until she entered the door. Just as she did, my cell phone went off. I groaned as I picked it up, knowing exactly who it was. "What's up, Koizumi?"

"I just wanted to check up on you. The truth is that I suddenly had the feeling that a closed space had formed, but it was gone just as

fast as it came. At first, I thought it might have been my imagination. I just wanted to be sure."

"Everything's fine," I said, feeling a little annoyed that he constantly felt the need to pester me every time something wasn't going perfectly.

"That's good to hear. To be honest, Nagato-san insisted that we go to the library when we parted ways, and while it's not my ideal location to hang out, I was finding this place to be quite relaxing. It would've been a shame to have to stop so early."

Good for you. Can I go now? The truth is that it bothered me slightly that Nagato took Koizumi to the library. I'd always figured that spot would be reserved for the two of us. I was feeling slightly disappointed.

I said goodbye to him shortly after that, both of us knowing that we'd see each other soon enough. Personally, I was glad I averted another bad situation. I just wished I didn't have to do it every other day. Anyway, we'd all soon meet up for lunch and split up again for part two of the search. Hopefully, I'd get a chance to get away from Haruhi for a little while…

I have no luck. Seriously, I must've kicked a puppy in a past life or something. As you may have guessed, I'm once again paired up with Haruhi, and this time it's just the two of us. I was also forced to pay for everyone's lunch to boot, causing 4000 yen to magically fly out of my wallet.

By now, Haruhi was in a considerably better mood. I had yet to determine whether this was a good thing or a bad thing for me, as I knew that this ultimately meant that a happy Haruhi would mean a highly, energetic Haruhi. That would be exhausting.

We waved to the other three Brigade members as they took off to parts unknown. It didn't take long after that before Haruhi

immediately grabbed my arm and began to drag me to where ever she felt like going.

Our first stop was the recreation center again. We ended up playing two more rounds of Go-kart racing in which both times I was forced to swallow my pride as I failed to beat Haruhi. Later, we went to an arcade and played both a zombie shooter and a dancing game. Haruhi absolutely refused to leave until she finished all the songs on the dance game and had beaten all the levels on the shooter. I also played along as best I could, but I was consistently out-competed by Haruhi every time. Finally, we went to the book store so Haruhi could try and find some manga to read. After spending a few minutes there, Haruhi had managed to find the latest copy of some psychic detective manga she seemed to enjoy. After all that, we were finally on out way back to our meeting spot to meet up with the rest of the Brigade.

Oh, and did I mention that I paid for all of it? ALL OF IT! The money that I had brought with me was quickly dwindling away. Why the hell didn't I leave it at home? What the hell was I thinking? I also couldn't help but feel like this had been another… date. It wasn't a date, dammit!

On our way back, Haruhi received a phone call from her mother. After having a brief conversation, I was informed that we would have to go food shopping before we went home. Wonderful… carrying a ton of groceries while walking several miles was always fun.

To summarize the next hour, we met up again at the café one last time before we were dismissed. We then made out way to the grocery store where we once again bought a bunch of odd ingredients along with the usual Japanese affair. After completing that, we were finally homeward bound, only this time I was forced to carry a ton of groceries. I was reminded of the fact that carrying so many heavy bags meant that my hands would soon be in tremendous pain as the plastic straps slowly dug themselves into my flesh.

Oh, and I had to pay for the groceries, too. I now had to deal with the fact that most of the money that my mother gave me to find a place to live was now gone after only a single day. I was seriously screwed. I not only had no chance of being able to find a place now, but I had nothing to pay Oruki with later when he finally lost patience with me and decided to ask for the money I owed him. This fact, combined with all the other nonsense I had to deal with today, made me incredibly irritable.

And the target of my irritation was none other Haruhi. Eventually, I had to stop and put the bags down since my hands hurt too much. When I did this, Haruhi yelled at me in annoyance.

"Hurry it up, Kyon! We need to get home! Stop slacking!"

It was then that I started to crack a bit. "Would it kill you to help me a bit?"

Haruhi narrowed her eyes at me. "Are you trying to undermine my authority? Have you forgotten that I am the leader and you are the grunt?"

"Whatever…" I said as I ignored her and rubbed my hands to relieve the pain.

"Don't ignore me! If you don't get your butt up and get moving, you'll face severe consequences!"

"I don't care!" I yelled, quickly losing my temper.

Haruhi's temper also seemed to flair up as well. "Why you ungrateful… what makes you think that you can act like that after all I've done for you?"

"And exactly what have you actually done for me?"

Haruhi held up her hand and began to point to her fingers one at a time. "Let's see, I helped you pack and move, threw you a party you

didn't deserve, helped you with homework, bought you lunch on more than one occasion, and let's not forget the fact that you'd be on the streets if I hadn't had the heart to allow you to stay under my roof."

If she was going to play that game, so could I. "And what, I haven't done anything in return? Like doing your chores, or any other menial task you ask me to do over the last year? Not to mention the tens of thousands of yen I've spent on you and the rest of the Brigade over your stupid rule. Hell, I even stood up to your bastard of a father just to try and save the Brigade, and I got my ass handed to me for it. Doesn't that count for anything?"

"I never asked you to go and do that! You did it on your own!"

"Well, I never asked to live with you, either!" I yelled angrily. "In fact, I never even…" I stopped myself right there, realizing that I was about to say something really stupid. It was too late. Haruhi's eyes widened in horror when she figured out what I was about to say.

"Go ahead… finish what you were going to say."

"Forget it," I said as I picked up the bags again, trying to drop the subject.

It didn't work, though. I could see her eyes tear up ever so slightly. "I get it. Is that how it is?" She then turned around and started sprinting towards home. "Fine! Just go ahead and leave! Go move up north with your stupid family! What do I care?!"

"Haruhi, wait!" I screamed as she took off, but it was to no avail. I said something rather careless that I didn't really mean. I stomped the ground in frustration before I tried to follow. Catching up to her was impossible, even if I wasn't weighed down with bags full of groceries. I tried my best to hustle as much as I could but doing so was miserable work. I was about three blocks away from her house before my cell phone rang. I dropped the bags immediately and answered it with frustration, knowing exactly who it was again.

"Yes, that is a close space you're sensing! And yes, it's my fault that it's there! Are you happy? Go away!" is what I would have liked to have said, but I held myself in, knowing my anger had caused enough problems already. Instead, I answered with a simple hello.

"You sound as if you already know why I'm calling. You also sound a bit upset. I guess something happened between you and Suzumiya-san?"

I rubbed my eyes and groaned before answering. Today was not nearly as fun for me as it should have been. "How big is it? It's not world ending is it?"

"No, it's not, but it's rather large. You must've upset her quite a bit."

What makes him think that I upset her? Whatever… he's right anyway. "Sorry…" I said feeling somewhat defeated. I'm only human. I hated walking on eggshells with Haruhi.

"It's quite alright," said Koizumi. "I actually think I can take advantage of this. See you later Kyon-kun."

I was left confused when I hung up. What did he mean by taking advantage of this closed space? Forget it. I don't even want to know.

Stopping to talk to Koizumi gave my hands enough rest to walk the rest of the way while carrying the bags. When I finally entered the front door to the house, I was startled by Oruki's screaming.

"How the hell did you get my phone number?!"

My heart had jumped into my throat. I thought for sure for half a second that he was screaming at me for upsetting Haruhi. My relief quickly turned to curiosity when I noticed he was yelling into his cell phone.

"What are you talking about? Where? Why the hell would I do that? Trust you? I don't even know you!"

It took a second for me to put two and two together and realize that it was probably Koizumi on the other line. What he said about taking advantage of this situation suddenly made sense. Perhaps he figured that if he showed Haruhi's parents a closed space that it would give incentive for them to keep their mouths shut.

"Fine! I'll do it! But if you even think of trying anything funny, I'll break your neck!" He then hung up the phone with a growl before looking at me. "That was Mr. Smiles. He wants my wife and I to meet up with him somewhere. Do you know anything about this?"

I nodded before answering. "Yup. Just… try to stay calm when you see it. And let Koizumi and his buddies take care of everything."

He raised an eyebrow at me. "What do you mean by 'it?'"

"It's best if Koizumi explains it. You'll find out when you get there."

He glared at me suspiciously for a minute before letting out an audible sigh and turning towards the kitchen. "Naru-chan! We're going out!"

Naru-san peeked her head out of the kitchen excitedly when she heard him. "Where are we going?"

"I have no idea," said Oruki as he began to head for the door.

"Ooo, that sounds like fun!" exclaimed Naru-san as she bounded out of the kitchen. "Wait for me!"

Shortly after that, the two of them got into their car and left to wherever Koizumi asked to meet them. It was then that I realized that for the first time since I moved in here that I was alone with Haruhi in the house. This both bothered and relieved me at that same time. I'd much rather try and apologize to her without her parents nearby, but I was a bit worried she might try to get violent with me. I'm sure I pissed her off pretty good.

I walked upstairs towards my room and noticed the door to her room was closed. No doubt she was inside. I didn't bother to talk to her right away. I figured that maybe it would be best to wait for her to cool down a bit before I talked to her. An hour should be long enough. I'll just do homework until then.

After doing my homework for nearly an hour, I put it down on the floor and laid back. I wasn't quite ready to apologize to her yet, so I decided to close my eyes. After about a minute, I heard a weird noise right next to me. I turned towards my nightstand to find that the stupid, wooden turtle Oruki had let me have was staring at me with its creepy eyes. This sent a chill down my spine, so I turned it around to have it face away from me before closing my eyes again. I then heard a noise again and turned towards the turtle once more. It was once again facing me. What the hell? Did it just turn around?

I sat up after this and stared it down. To my horror, the turtle began to turn its head towards me before giving me an evil smile…

Sorry about the cliffhanger. This wasn't originally supposed to be the end of this chapter, but for reasons that shall remain only known to me, I decided to end the chapter here. It shouldn't be too long before I get the next chapter up.

Endless Eight is going to episode 6. Dammit, I want to see Sighs and Disappearance.

This will be the last time I ask you guys for reviews. I don't want to wear out my support as you guys have been awesome. See you next update!

Chapter 16

Okay, time to move on with the story… got nothing new to say… nope… nothing…

Who am I kidding? I'm freaking stoked! Thank you everyone for helping this story reach the top! WWWWWOOOOOHHHHOOOOOOOO! When I started this fic, I never could have imagined that it would be this popular. I would've been happy if I'd gotten 50 reviews. Now such thoughts seem all but silly in hindsight. There's nothing left for me to do now but to finish the story and build upon my success.

Anyway, it's time to continue the next chapter. As I promised, I updated as quick as possible. Hope you guys enjoy it! I really put my all into this one!

Chapter 16

I stared directly at the darkened marble eyes of the wooden turtle Oruki had carved some time ago. I felt the adrenaline began to flow through my blood stream, kick-starting my fight or flight response. This caused a major increase in my heart rate, making it beat with enough force that I could actually hear it. My mouth became unbearably dry, and my nose began to itch. I could also feel my hands becoming increasingly wet with sweat.

This was fear, pure and simple. The real kind. Not the kind where you're afraid of being rejected by a girl you like or the kind where you dread seeing the results of a test. No, this was the kind where you knew your life was in real danger. In the course of the last year, I'd grown quite familiar with this feeling. More than once, I've managed to escape death. Hell, I just had an experience like that yesterday. This isn't fair. Can't I get a break from danger?

As you likely remember, the turtle had begun to move. I was at a loss for why it was doing this. Did Haruhi wish for this to happen? It seemed unlikely. I can't think of any reason why she would want this thing to become animated. Perhaps it's possessed by a demon or spirit, like Naru-san always wanted. No, that can't be it. It had something to do with Haruhi. I was sure of it.

It continued to stare me down with an unbelievably creepy smile. A smile that almost seemed vaguely familiar. I got up from the bed and began to move towards the door. It kept following me with those dark, lifeless eyes. And then that something happened that made my skin crawl. It spoke.

"It… seems… that… you've… got… ten… in… to… some… trou… ble… this… time…"

Its manner of speech was incredibly bizarre, but what made it worse was that the voice seemed vaguely familiar. It was a girl's voice. A voice that now reminded me more of a certain, disturbing, blue-haired girl. I reluctantly answered the turtle.

"R… Ryoko?"

The turtle changed the way it spoke immediately after I mentioned the name. It now sounded exactly like Ryoko Asakura.

"Looks like you're as perceptive as ever, Kyon-kun. I suppose that you're quite surprised to see me."

I swallowed hard and slowly continued to back up towards the door. Just as I put my hand on the door knob, the turtle… er… Asakura spoke again.

"You're wasting your time. You won't be able to get away."

I ignored what she said and turned the door knob. I was fortunate to be able to leave my room and bolt down the stairs. I immediately ran to the front door and tried to open it. It wouldn't budge. No matter

how hard I tried to turn the knob, it wouldn't turn. I immediately ran into the living room, knowing the door to the garage was there. Once again, this proved fruitless, as this door refused to open as well.

"Are you satisfied? You're trapped. There's no way out for you."

The voice came from behind. I slowly turned around to find that the turtle had somehow made its way onto the coffee table in the living room. How did it do that? Surely it didn't walk there. It's almost like it magically teleported itself there.

"What do you want?" I asked nervously, somewhat afraid of the answer.

"The answer to that is simple. You said that you never wanted to be here, right? As a result, Suzumiya-san then expressed a desire for you to go. Well, I'm here to see to it that you are gone…" The Asakura turtle then closed its eyes and smiled its creepiest smile yet. "… forever…"

I quickly grabbed the turtle with one hand and threw it as hard as I could against a nearby wall. I wasn't sure why I did that. I seriously doubted it would actually work.

I heard the TV next to me suddenly turn on. When I turned to face it, I saw the face of Ryoko Asakura directly in the middle of it, with television snow behind her. She looked directly at me, smiling like some kind of sociopath. I began to back away from the TV, trying to put some distance between me and her.

"How did you come back?" I asked, hoping to stall her long enough to think of something.

"I'm afraid that's not important. All that matters is that you die."

I had no idea how I was going to defend myself. I didn't even know how she intended to kill me. I was all alone. Oruki and Naru-san

were gone right now. That means the only ones here are me and… Haruhi…

"Haruhi!" I screamed at the top of my lungs, hoping beyond hope that she would hear me.

"I'm afraid that she won't be able to hear you," said Asakura. "Not that she'd want to see you right now, anyway. She's quite upset with you."

It was then that the television switched from her face to some random scene that had Haruhi and me. In fact, it was the argument we had earlier today, except the image was in black and white. It was weird seeing me in the third person like that. The image then switched to the club room, where Haruhi and Asahina-san were in their bunny costumes with me looking at them. It then moved to the scene with me getting my ass kicked by Oruki almost a week ago. Then there was a scene on the roof where Haruhi and I were talking. More scenes kept showing up, each one progressively further back in time until it came to the scene when Haruhi made me write that message in chalk on her school's athletic field. It then switched back to Asakura's face.

"You've always had a strong effect on Suzumiya-san's emotional state. You have the power to make her upset or happy with merely a few choice words. Right now, your words have angered her greatly. Enough in fact for her to wish you out of her life. And now…"

I then noticed the controllers to the game system under the TV had begun to float in the air. They appeared ready to strike.

"… I'll see to it that she never sees you again."

One of the controllers lunged at me before I could get away. It wrapped the cord around my legs and tripped me up. I looked up to see the other controller about to strike. I rolled over just in time to prevent my face being bashed in by the hard plastic. It lifted up again to hit me, but this time I caught it in my hands. I then smashed it

against the wall, breaking it into pieces. I then tried to remove the cord around my legs so I could get up and run again.

It was to my horror that I saw the door to the garage suddenly open, followed by the entrance of a floating ax. The door than immediately shut with a loud slam. In a panic, I began to back away as best as I could while on my back. I thought my life was going to end for sure when I watched it swing down at me. By some miracle, it cut the cord around my legs instead, giving me a chance to escape.

I quickly got up and bolted for the kitchen, but just as I got to the entrance to it, I saw several kitchen knives float up and point directly at me. Reacting by instinct, I darted into the basement door and closed it just as the knives hit it, driving themselves into the wood.

I waited a few seconds before sighing in relief. It seemed for the moment that I was safe. I walked down the stairs and began to look around. I had to think of some way to get out of here. I needed to either somehow get Haruhi's attention, or get to Nagato.

It was then when I realized that going into the basement had been a horrible idea. First, the radio down there suddenly turned on. After a couple seconds of static, Asakura's voice became clear enough to make out among the sounds of crackling.

"I'm afraid that there's no where you can go where you are safe. I have complete control over everything in this house. You should really stop resisting. Suzumiya-san wants you gone from her life, and I'm going to make that happen."

"Since when did you give a damn about what she wanted?!"

There was no answer. Instead, I heard the loud roar of a handheld buzz saw come to life. It, along with a hammer and a carving knife, lifted into the air and began to slowly make their way towards me. In response, I grabbed the only thing I could find to defend myself, a two-by-four. As the instruments of death came uncomfortably close to me, I swung the large piece of would, smacking the saw away

from me. The hammer and the knife tried to attack, but I was able to barely duck underneath them. I then ran directly up the stairs towards the door again. Unfortunately, I already knew that danger was on the other side of that door, too. I looked back to find the hammer, buzz saw and carving knife begin to float up the stairs. I was dismayed to also find that the saw continued to spin even without being plugged in. I was trapped, with certain danger on both sides. I knew I only had one choice. I had to take my chances and open the door.

The moment I did, I was greeted by the sight of an ax swinging directly at my head. I reacted by blocking the attack with the two-by-four. The blade of the ax wedged itself into the wood, causing it to get stuck. I fought with the ax for a second before I pushed it off. I then bolted towards the stairs and up them, running immediately towards the door to Haruhi's room. I began to beat my fist on it, desperately trying to get Haruhi's attention.

"Haruhi? Haruhi! Help! Please answer the door! Help me!"

I continued to beat the door as hard as I could, but she never answered. Was she really so mad at me that she would ignore me even when my life was in danger? Or was this the work of Asakura, somehow using her powers to make it so Haruhi couldn't hear me yelling and beating at the door?

I looked towards the stairs to find the buzz saw, hammer, ax and several knives had reached the top of the stairs. The ax had managed to dislodge the two-by-four that it was stuck in before. Seeing no other options, I was forced to duck into the bathroom, locking the door behind me.

This was a nightmare. I was now completely trapped with no way out. At best, I could hope for at least a minute or two of extra time before the door would be broken down.

I then heard that evil voice again. "It looks like you have no where else to run. Now you're going to die."

I looked at the mirror to find that my reflection had been replaced with the image of Asakura. She continued to smile at me as she spoke.

"You look quite scared. Indeed, you must be very afraid of your inevitable demise. I'm afraid I can't relate, though. Even when Nagato destroyed me, I felt nothing resembling that emotion."

"You stupid bitch! Leave me alone!" I then grabbed a hair brush and threw it at the mirror. It shattered into many pieces, but doing so was really in vain. Instead of seeing one Asakura, I now saw several, each at a slightly different angle. They began to giggle sadistically. It was a sound worse than dragging one's nails across a chalk board. Even when I covered my ears, I could still hear it, piercing my sanity.

I then heard the sounds of the door to the bathroom being attacked. I could hear the buzz saw cutting away while the ax and hammer repeatedly swung into the door. I knew it wouldn't be long before the door would be forced open.

In a last ditch desperate move, I grabbed my cell phone. I immediately dialed Nagato's number. I put my ear to the phone, hoping beyond all hope that she would answer. Unfortunately, she never did. In fact, there wasn't even a ring tone. This can't be happening!

I then desperately dialed Koizumi's number. I knew he was likely busy chatting away with Haruhi's parents by now, but I had to try. But just like with Nagato, I failed to get even a ringing sound on the other end. Just silence. I then tried and dialed Asahina-san's number. I knew she wasn't the most reliable of the three, but surely she could do something. Alas, even calling her number only rewarded me with silence.

There was one more thing I could try. I went and called Haruhi's number. Maybe with a miracle she'd answer. She had to. After dialing her number, I put it to my ear and waited… waited for the sound of ringing… but there was nothing. Silence… I didn't give up. I

dialed her number again and put it to my ear. Come on Haruhi! Please answer! I need you! Please! But still there was nothing. I could feel tears welling in my eyes from the sheer hopelessness of the situation.

By now, the door was almost completely destroyed. I couldn't figure out how it managed to hold out as long as it did, but I only had seconds now before the door would give in. I went and grabbed the rod that held the towel rack up. I knew the only thing I could do was fight my way through and hope that I didn't get killed.

Realizing this was my only chance, I kicked down what was left of the door. The hammer and the buzz saw were knocked back onto the floor while the ax swung directly at me. I parried the attack with the towel rack and pushed the ax aside. The carving knife shot directly at me. I attempted to evade it. It nicked my shoulder, leaving a small gash before it drove itself into the wall on the other side. Seeing my chance, I ran directly into my room, once again locking the door. I wasn't sure why I kept locking the door. It wasn't like these objects could turn a door knob anyway.

I sighed with relief when I was sure that I was momentarily safe again. But then I felt a sharp pain come from my stomach. I looked down at it before finding myself in complete, unimaginable horror. In my attempt to fight through all the instruments of death, apparently one of the kitchen knives had managed to bury itself directly into my abdomen.

I slowly wrapped my hand around the handle and pulled the blade out. Several inches of it were now coated in blood, and it wasn't long before more began to leak out of me. I felt my hands begin to shake as I started going into the beginning stages of shock. I'd felt this sensation before. It was all too familiar. Funny… I remember Ryoko doing that to me, too.

"That's quite a nasty wound you have there," said the demonic voice once again. I turned to my nightstand again to find that the turtle had

managed to make its way into my room again. "It won't be long now. Without medical treatment, you will surely die."

Realizing that my time was running out, I began to beat against the wall adjacent to Haruhi's room in an absolute last ditch effort to get her attention.

"Haruhi! I'm sorry! Please answer me! I don't want to go! I want to stay here! Please Haruhi! I'm so sorry! Please answer me!"

"I've told you already, it won't work. It's too late for that now. There's nothing left for you to do but die."

I glared at the turtle once more. I then walked up to it and picked it up again. Turning towards the window, I threw it with all my anger and hatred. Its wooden body flew towards the glass and shattered it while passing through. It was then I realized that a small miracle had happened. With the window broken, I now had a chance to escape. I looked out the window to see that the turtle had landed on the lawn on its back. It flailed away in a useless attempt to turn itself onto its belly. This did not deter Asakura from speaking to me from down below.

"This won't work, you know. Even if you managed to jump down without injuring yourself, you wouldn't get far before you'd bleed to death."

She was right. When I looked down at my stomach again, I saw that my shirt and pants were now completely stained in red. There were large spots all over the floor, as well. I could also feel myself getting light-headed. This was bad. Really bad.

"Besides…" said the possessed turtle as several knives along with the ax, buzz saw and hammer made their way to the lawn. "Just incase it's remotely possible for you to get help before you died, I'll just kill you right here. You have no chance of surviving. Just give up and let things take their course."

I knew now that escaping was now impossible. There was no way I could take the fall to the ground and get up before I was chopped up, stabbed and bashed into pieces. There was only one hope left. I turned to my left to see Haruhi's window. I then thought that if I could reach it, I might be able to pull myself up to it and look inside. Maybe Haruhi would see me looking through the window and would come to my rescue. It was a long shot, but I had to try.

I had no choice but to act quickly. I was getting weaker by the second. I ignored the pain of glass cutting my feet as I stepped out onto the edge of the window. I then attempted to reach for the edge of Haruhi's window, but it was just barely out of reach. I knew that I would have to jump if I would have any chance.

I leapt towards the window and miraculously managed to get a grip on it. All I had to do now was pull myself up. I began to flex my muscles as I slowly lifted myself up to try and look in. Unfortunately, what little strength I still had was insufficient to be able to pull me up. I looked down to see that the knives had positioned themselves now directly under me, pointing straight up. If I fell from here, I would surely be skewered. It can't end this way. I have to try again.

I redoubled my efforts and tried again to pull myself up. I gritted my teeth and closed my eyes incredibly tightly as I tried to elevate myself high enough to look into the window. But once again, I found my strength faltering. It was now too late. I'd lost too much blood to be able to do this. Without the aid of a proper blood supply, my muscles simple had no hope of lifting the weight of my body. No… I have to do this… I have to see her. I have to see Haruhi… one last time…

It was then that my muscles gave out and I was left hanging uselessly onto the edge of the window. I then felt tears roll down my eyes when I realized that I was going to die. There was no hope left now. My grip was rapidly fading, and soon I would have to let go. My body began to become increasingly numb as it no longer even had enough blood to feed my sensory nervous system. I felt a fuzziness overtake me as the last of my grip gave out.

As my body fell, I watched as the window to Haruhi's room slowly drifted away from me. I held out my hand one last time to reach out to it, but this was merely a futile reflex action. No doubt now that my life was over. Just before I landed on the knives positioned below me, my vision completely faded into darkness…

My eyes shot open. I was looking at a familiar ceiling. My eyes darted around the room. I soon realized that I was in my room. More specifically, I was in the guest room that I'd been using as my room for the past two weeks. I immediately put my hand on my stomach. To my surprised, there was no wound there. In fact, I was perfectly fine.

I quickly sat up and looked around. Nothing was out of order. Everything in it was exactly the way it was left when I laid down. Even the homework that I dropped onto the floor. I sighed in enormous relief when I realized that the whole ordeal was nothing more than a nightmare. A horrible one at that. Perhaps the worst one I've ever had. It felt so real, though. And Ryoko Asakura appearing? No doubt that her image must've been closely linked to the part of my brain that registers fear. Thinking about it that way, it was no wonder why she suddenly appeared in my dream.

I looked at my clock. Nearly three hours had passed since I entered the room to try and wait for Haruhi to calm down. Haruhi! She was okay, right?! Calm down… it was just a dream. Of course she's fine.

My eyes then immediately turned to the wooden turtle sitting on my nightstand, looking completely harmless. In disgust, I picked it up and threw it at my door. I probably shouldn't have done that. It left a noticeable dent in the door when I did that. I only hope that Oruki doesn't notice that later.

It was at this point that I realized that now was the time to apologize to Haruhi. I'd waited more than long enough, and the dream was a painful reminder of how helpless I was when I was alone. I immediately got up and walked up to the wall adjacent to her room.

I started by knocking on it. "Haruhi? Can you hear me?" I waited for a minute, but I didn't hear a response. I decided to continue anyway. "Listen, I'm really sorry about what I said! I didn't mean any of it! Please forgive me! I don't want to go! I want to stay here! I only said the things I said because I was upset that I spent most of my money! The truth is that I still owe your dad the rent for living here, and now I don't have near enough to find a place! I realized that I was totally screwed, and I took some of that out on you! Can you hear me? Please answer me!"

Still, she didn't respond. My heart sank in despair. I was worried now that she wouldn't ever forgive me. At that point, I gave up and left my room. I went down stairs into the living room and started watching some TV to try and clear my mind. Unfortunately, it didn't work, and I became rather depressed, only barely paying attention to the TV.

I then noticed my cell phone ringing. My heart was incredibly relieved to find that it was Haruhi. I didn't even care about the incredible silliness of her calling me when I was still in the house. I answered it right away. "Hello?"

"You could have said something earlier, you know? If you couldn't afford to spend all that money, why didn't you say anything?"

I sighed a bit as I took in the question. Dummy. You know damn well why. You would have gotten upset and harassed me about it. Not to mention you would have made me pay you back through indenture servitude or worse.

"… I would have gotten over it… if you really needed it that badly…"

I sighed, realizing that it was partly my fault for not saying anything sooner. I must have accidentally given her the impression earlier that I was free to spend all my money or something.

"I'm sorry, Haruhi. I shouldn't have spent any of it. I just got sick of having it and not being able to do anything with it. It's too late now, though. I don't know what the hell I'm going to do now."

It was then that I noticed Haruhi hanging up on me. I was a bit puzzled at first, but after a minute, I heard footsteps coming down the stairs. I soon saw Haruhi entering the living room with something in her hand. She turned her head away while holding it out to me. "Take it."

I realized that there was a small stack of yen bills in her hand. "What's this?'

"It's my allowance that I'd been saving up. Just take it already."

I felt a little bad about accepting her generosity. "I can't take all that."

"You need it more than I do. Stop being an idiot and take it. Most of the stuff you bought today should have been bought with my money anyway."

I reluctantly took the money. I quickly counted it and found it to be about 30,000 yen. I still didn't feel right about taking all of it, so I took out ten thousand of it and handed and held it out to her. "I can't take all of it."

"I don't want it. Why are you making this so difficult?"

"Because then I'll feel like I owe you again. I figure this hundred covers what I spent on drinks and lunch for the Brigade as well as what I spent at the arcade for myself. This'll make us even."

"Then consider the drinks and lunch as well as the time at the arcade my treat. Keep it."

I looked at her with both suspicion and confusion. "You? Treating me? That would be a first. Maybe I should upset you more often."

"Idiot," said Haruhi as she crossed her arms and sat down on the couch next to me. "Look, I thought a bit about what you said, and I realized that… maybe I underappreciate the effort you give on behalf of the Brigade a bit."

Can you say understatement? Good…

"And… the whole part where you stood up to my dad…" She saw silent for a minute, as if she was trying to find the right words to say without having to make herself appear too vulnerable. She gave a quick grunt before finishing her statement. "Look, you deserve it, okay? Just drop it before I change my mind. I was getting sick of keeping track of who owed who what, anyway! Let's just drop it and move on!"

While the idea of not worrying about whether I owed her any favors or if she owed me any sounded great, I suspected that somewhere in the back of her mind that she was still keeping a tally of favors. Of course, her favors would always be weighed more heavily than my favors. Nevertheless, I was just glad the fight we had earlier was settled. I was reminded a bit of the awkward conversation I had with her father the day after he manhandled me, where he asked that we forget about the whole thing. Only this time, I didn't feel like Haruhi was being out of line with any of it. Perhaps she has a little more sense than her father. Maybe…

It was then that Haruhi began to look around the room, looking a little puzzled. "Where'd my parents go?"

I'd almost forgotten by this point that the two of them were still gone. I didn't know where that closed space was that Koizumi was taking them, but it must've been pretty far away if they had been gone for this long. I was slightly worried about the two of them, but I figured the probability was low that anything serious had happened to them. Koizumi's usually not so careless as to allow anything to happen to anyone he considered important. "I'm not sure. I thought that maybe they'd gone on a date or something."

"Pfft, yeah right," said Haruhi with serious doubt. "My dad hasn't taken my mother out in years. To be honest, I don't know what my mother sees in him."

You know what? I'd have to agree. What does Naru-san see in Oruki? Surely she doesn't stay with him for his personality. I guess it could be his looks, not that I would really know. But looks alone can't keep a relationship together. Was there a side to him that only she ever got to see? Who knows? Maybe she stays with him because she knows he's the only person on the planet who could tolerate her weirdness.

Haruhi then looked at the clock. "It's getting late. Looks like we have no choice but to make dinner ourselves." She then stood up and looked at me. "Get up, Kyon. You're going to help."

"What do want me to do?" I asked as I lifted myself off the couch and followed her into the kitchen.

"You can prepare the ingredients while I do the rest."

I began to wonder as to what Haruhi would want to make. "Today… isn't it Middle Eastern night?"

"Nah… I'm not in the mood for Middle Eastern," she said as she opened the refrigerator to inspect what was available to work with. Since we'd gone shopping earlier today, there was likely to be plenty to work with. I then watched as she began to pull out various different vegetables and some beef. She then handed me all the ingredients and directed me to where the knives and cutting board were located. When I put everything down, I went to grab a knife from the block it was placed in. It took me a second to realize it, but I suddenly noticed that the knife I was holding was the very same knife that stabbed me in my dream. It took me a moment to get over the disturbing feeling before I decided not to think about it.

I started by trying to crop the cabbage to the best of my ability. The truth is, though, that my skills with a knife were mediocre at best. On a few rare occasions, I'd helped my mother in the kitchen whenever we were celebrating something, and she needed an extra set of hands to help with getting the cooking done on time. I began with trying to chop the cabbage. Unfortunately, I was having a rough time

of it as the blade refuse to chop cleanly, forcing me to push down hard to have it go through.

Apparently, Haruhi was keeping an eye on me while I was doing this and decided to butt in. "Dummy. What are you doing? Are you trying to hurt yourself?" She then walked up to me and held out her hand. I handed her the knife and watched as she examined it. "This one is dull. Hold on a sec." She then opened a drawer and picked out a different one. "Try this one."

Following her directions, I used the knife she suggested and was pleased to find that it was significantly easier to chop the cabbage this time. I was soon done chopping it up and was ready to cut a daikon, a rather large, white radish. The vegetable was considerably tougher than cabbage, so I raised the knife high up before swinging it down to try and chop it cleanly.

Once again, Haruhi saw it fit to criticize my incompetence. "What are you an idiot? Stop it!" She then came up to me and grabbed both of my hands. She put my left hand at the base of the radish and my right hand, the one holding the knife, a few inches above the vegetable. She the guided the motion of the knife, showing me the correct motion needed to properly chop it. "This is how you do it. There's no need to raise the knife so high. Okay?" I nodded as Haruhi continued to demonstrate a couple more times.

To be honest, I was feeling a little bothered by the fact that this moment felt way more intimate than Haruhi probably figured it would be. My sympathetic nervous system once again activated, sending signals to my heart to start pumping harder. The supple feeling of Haruhi's hands on mine combined with the sound of her voice close to my ear made me almost lose my concentration. I could feel my face becoming mildly warmer as well. I was somewhat conflicted on whether I wanted her to stop or continue. However, she eventually let go of my hands and stepped back a bit, putting her hands on her hips.

"Do you think you can finish without cutting your fingers off?"

The grotesqueness of her question was enough to snap me back into reality. "Oh! Uh… yeah." I then turned back to my work, this time cutting the vegetables in the proper manner. It's best not to think about what just happened.

When I was finally done cutting up the vegetables and beef, Haruhi got to work putting them together in a stir fry. I decided to grab a soda from the fridge and sit at the table, watching her as she cooked the ingredients together like a well oil-machine. Her eyes were the picture of focus and concentration. Even when she added a small amount of sake to the pan and it burst into flames, licking the tips of her hair, she continued to work away unfazed. I was once again reminded of the fact that this girl was good at almost everything. It seemed inconceivable that so much talent could be crammed into one body.

To pass the time, I decided to ask her a question. "Did your mother teach you how to cook?"

Haruhi eyes swiftly darted in my direction before returning to the food. "Not really. Well, at least not directly. Most of what I learned about cooking came from either watching her or by experimentation. I don't think that cooking is that hard. You just have to understand that some flavors and textures don't go well with others. The only hard part is making sure you don't burn or overcook the food. As long as you pay attention and don't get distracted, that shouldn't happen." She then lifted the pan one last time and shook it before turning off the stove. "It's done. Go set up the table."

I'll be honest, eating dinner without Haruhi's parents sitting with us made for a very surreal feeling. Whether I liked it or not, it was weird not having them in here with us. It made what was usually a quiet moment of time seem even quieter, to the point of almost being eerie, and that didn't even take into account of the fact that the idea of the two of us having dinner alone almost made it feel… romantic? No… it wasn't like that. This was nothing more than two people sitting at a table trying feed themselves. There was no need to look into this any deeper than that.

To remove any of the awkwardness, I decided to make some small talk. "So… we're back in the club room tomorrow. It's been too long."

"Yup," said Haruhi as she finished her bite of food. "But don't you think that you'll be in there slacking. We have a lot of work to do."

I was a bit baffled by this statement. "Why? What are we doing?"

Haruhi looked at me with a small amount of annoyance. "Have you forgotten already? We still need to get ready for our trip to Kyoto. Did you think I'd forgotten about that?"

Honestly… yes. I really did think you would forget about it. I sure as hell did. With all that happened over the last week, it was easy to put out of my mind. I seriously can't believe that we're back to this whole nonsense where you plan to publicly humiliate James Randi.

"Thanks to that little setback that my father caused, we're severely behind schedule with the preparations. For the next couple weeks leading to the trip, our goal will be completely focused on making sure we're as ready as possible to take down that tyrant!"

Tyrant? If anyone is a tyrant, that would be you, missy. Seriously, can you not see how much of a disaster this trip will be?

Haruhi seemed completely undeterred by my obvious lack of enthusiasm. Her eyes sparkled like an ocean of galaxies, and her smile beamed with all of her million-watt brightness. Why couldn't she be this passionate about doing something constructive, like feeding the poor or cleaning the earth? I sighed inwardly as I realized that regardless of the foolishness of this trip of hers, I was going to tag along anyway, dead or alive.

Oh, and did I mention that dinner was delicious? Did I really have to?

When we finished eating, we gathered up the dishes and got ready to clean up. Since it was only the two of us, cleaning up was a lot

easier. I asked her another question while I was drying one of the last dishes. "So what do you want to do now?"

"I was going to climb onto the roof and watch the stars. I need to clear my head a bit."

"Okay," I said as I wiped the last glass. "I'll leave you alone then."

"Well…" spoke Haruhi, looking a tad nervous. "If you wanted to come up there too, I wouldn't mind. Just as long as you keep quiet."

There was a minor conflict going on inside of me. I wasn't sure why, but a part of me wanted to take her up on her offer. Ultimately though, I turned it down. "That's alright. I'm going to go watch some TV."

We finished cleaning up after that and split off to do whatever we wanted to do. I sat down on the couch and began to flip through the channels. I was disappointed to find that most of the channels contained nothing but crap. Eventually, I settled onto a channel that had an anime I hadn't seen before. It was the middle of the episode, so I wasn't really able to make out the plot too much. The one thing that sucks about most anime is the fact that if you didn't watch it from the beginning, it was almost impossible to follow.

Unfortunately, this was made even worse by the fact that my attention was somewhat diverted. Despite my attempts, the little voice in my head that wanted to follow Haruhi up onto the roof didn't go away. In fact, it was stronger now, partly because the other voice that fought against it was slowly becoming incapacitated with boredom. I noticed my eyes were constantly darting upward towards the roof. For whatever reason, I was feeling incredibly uneasy being by myself. I tried my hardest to ignore the feeling, but eventually it became too much. In a huff, I turned the TV off and headed upstairs.

I quietly entered Haruhi's room and headed through her window. I carefully placed my foot on the "step" and pulled myself onto the roof. When I got on top, I was greeted by the sight of Haruhi,

dreamily staring into the night sky. She diverted her eyes briefly when she noticed that I decided to join her. "Oh, hey."

"Yo," I said as I positioned myself next to her. "There wasn't anything good on TV."

"Okay…" she spoke, her voice sounding almost devoid of emotion. The two of us simply laid there for a while, not saying a word. To be absolutely truthful, I was okay with that. For some reason, it felt right to just lay here without saying a word or making a sound. It was as if there really wasn't anything that needed to be said. I felt… content… And to add to that, the stars were unbelievably bright tonight. Infinitely brighter than the last time I went up here with Haruhi. Somehow, the light pollution seemed non-existent. I began to wonder if this was the work of Haruhi's subconscious. It's almost as if the heavens decided to put on a show, just for the two of us. I really couldn't say as to how long we were like this. I was completely lost in the moment.

It was Haruhi that broke the silence, pulling me out of my trance. She had put her hand out towards the sky, as if she was trying to reach the stars. "It's so hard to imagine that they're really as far away as they say in school."

"Yeah?" I asked, turning my head slightly to look at her.

"They also say that nothing can travel faster than the speed of light, not that light is slow by any stretch of the imagination. But… even at those speeds, it takes four years just to reach the closest star. In fact, most of the stars in our galaxy are hundreds, even thousands of light years away. And the closest galaxy to ours is millions and millions of light years away. It's seems so incredibly impossible."

I was beginning to wonder as to where she was going with this. "So? Space is big. What's wrong with that?"

"It's just… that if our galaxy alone wasn't big enough, it's the fact that even moving at the fastest possible speeds makes it almost

impossible to ever reach most of those stars in a lifetime. When you think about it that way, it's so unlikely that we'd ever run into aliens. What are the odds that any of them live close enough to visit us without worrying about dying before reaching us?"

Now I understood what she was getting at. I decided to try and reassure her. "Doesn't the theory of relativity state that time slows down the faster you go? Maybe if you take that into account, it's possible to travel from one star to another in a lifetime."

"I guess," said Haruhi, her voice sounding more and more depressed. "But even if that were possible, what are the odds that they'd ever find us. It's like trying to find a needle in a haystack that's as large as our sun… maybe larger." She then sat up and wrapped her arms around her legs, still staring at the sky. "I want to believe that they would've found a way to find us, and that they would've also found a way to travel around space in a way that is fast enough to overcome the tremendous distance, but it's hard sometimes."

"They're out there," I said to Haruhi reassuringly. "I'm sure they're closer than you think." I of course already knew I was right. I wouldn't tell her that, though. She had her chance to believe me when I told her Nagato was an alien.

Haruhi smiled lightly, perhaps feeling a bit better after my attempt to comfort her. She then turned to me with a surprising question. "Do you remember the day we first talked to each other?"

I blinked at her as I contemplated the answer. Oh course I remember. How could I not? I find it hard to forget about anything involving you. "Yeah."

"I still had my long hair back then. I used to change its style everyday based on what day it was. And you were the first one to say anything about it."

I remember what she was talking about, but I was a bit puzzled. I thought she was talking about the first time we spoke. If I

remembered correctly, she was talking about the second time, not counting the time I went back in time. She still doesn't know that was me.

"Do you remember what you asked me?"

"Yeah," I said as I dove deep into the pit of my memories to remember the exact quote. "I think I said something along the lines of 'Do you change your hair-style to ward off alien invaders?' I think that's what I said."

"Yeah, that's it. I've always wanted to ask you what made you ask me that."

"I really don't know," I answered. "I think I was bored or something, and I remembered your introduction, so I just asked whatever was on my mind. What made you want to answer me?"

Haruhi paused a bit to reflect on the answer. "I think I was mildly impressed by your observational skills, so I figured I'd go and give you the test."

I was confused by this statement. "Wait a minute, what test? I don't remember anything like that?"

Haruhi smiled smugly as she explained. "I went and I stared you down. I figured out back in my last year of junior high that guys that were weak would easily divert their eyes if you stare at them for an extended period of time. I used this technique to try and weed out the losers who I knew for a fact weren't aliens, time-travelers or espers. Any of those three would pass that test with flying colors."

I understood what she was saying, remembering the uncomfortable staring contest we apparently had that morning. "Did I pass?"

"Yup. I wouldn't have kept talking to you if you didn't. I realized too that you looked a little familiar, too. I couldn't put my finger on it, but I was sure I'd seen you somewhere before. Anyway, I figured that you

were okay enough to talk to. I had hoped you were something other than an ordinary human, but I was wrong."

"For shame," I said as I decided to continue to ask questions. "By the way, why did you cut your hair the day after?'

"Was it the day after?" asked Haruhi, trying to work her way through the cloudiness of her memories. "It was, wasn't it? Huh… It wasn't for any special reason. I eventually got sick of messing with it every morning. Not to mention that it took forever to wash and dry. I just figured it would save me a lot of time in the morning." She then started to look concerned, stroking her hair a bit. "Why? Did I look better with long hair?"

"You're hair is fine," I answered, somewhat dishonestly. There was a small part of me that would've enjoyed seeing her wear a long-haired ponytail again. I then decided to bust her bubble about the fact that she was wrong that her and I first talked on that day. "I hate to say this to you, but that day wasn't the first time we've spoken."

Haruhi seemed especially perplexed now. "What? Yes it is? What are you talking about?"

I shook my head, smiling smugly. "The actual first time we spoke was during our first week of high school. You had… I think… four ponytails at the time, so I think it was Friday. Yeah…"

Judging from her eye movement, I could tell that she was delving as deep as she could into her memories. She didn't seem to succeed, though. "Are you sure? I don't remember that."

"It's true. I remember asking if your introduction to the class was a joke."

"What did I say?"

"You pretty much put me down and told me to stop wasting your time. You really don't remember, huh?"

Haruhi shook her head, looking increasingly disappointed. "I can't for the life of me remember. I think… there were a lot of different people that talked to me that first week. It's possible that with all those people talking to me that I forgot about who was who. I was kinda in my own world back then."

"And how is that different from now?" I asked teasingly.

Haruhi punched me in the shoulder in response. "Shut up! You know what I mean!" She then sighed a bit, looking at the sky again. "You weren't upset over that, were you?"

"I got over it."

"Knowing you, you probably deserved it, but… Well, if I really did that… it wasn't personal. I was like that to everyone. I was a different person then."

I found it amusing that she felt so bad about what she did that day. "It's cool. I know that you wouldn't be like that now." You're just abusive in other ways now.

I glanced again at Haruhi. I could tell that she was somewhat disappointed that she couldn't remember. It wasn't for a lack of trying, either. I could tell that she desperately wanted to remember. Perhaps she secretly wanted to cherish the memory of the first time we ever spoke. It's like losing a valued heirloom that you threw away because you didn't realize its value.

Eventually, she gave up and a bright smile appeared on her face again. "Hey! Let's have another staring contest!"

"Why the hell do you want to do that?"

"To find out if you still have what it takes," she said, pointing her finger at my nose. "Come on, Kyon! Don't tell me you're afraid you'll lose!"

I rolled my eyes in exasperation. "Fine, I accept. Whatever…"

Haruhi positioned herself slightly closer to me and closed her eyes. "Okay, we'll begin on the count of three. First one to divert their eyes away loses! Ready? One… two… three!"

The staring contest had begun. We stared at each other's eyes intensely. Haruhi had a mischievous grin on her face while we continued looking into each other's eyes. Despite it being dark out, but I could still easily make out the color of her eyes as we continued the contest. Those amber orbs continued to sparkle with an endless magic, and I was quickly absorbed into them once again. This isn't the first time I'd noticed, but I had to admit once more that her eyes were amazingly beautiful.

"You're going to lose," said Haruhi with confidence.

"Sure I am," I retorted in sarcasm.

Another minute passed. We were still staring, but our expressions had become more serious now. This had become almost life and death, neither of us wanting to give in. I realized that this contest was a lot easier than I had thought. Whether I wanted to or not, I couldn't move my eyes away from hers.

"You ready to give in?'

"Not a chance."

The intensity of the staring had become so great that I completely didn't notice that our faces were moving closer and closer, until I suddenly felt her breath on my face again. It was at this point that I became incredibly nervous. I was now only a few centimeters from her face once again. The feelings I was getting from this were becoming incredibly familiar now. The sensation of my neck muscles being in conflict with each other returned, and the ones keeping my head back were losing. I moved in other centimeter. I was quickly

losing the will to resist. Was I really going through with this? What am I doing?

It was only when my eyes darted down to her lips that Haruhi leapt up and screamed in excitement. "Ha! I win!"

When I realized what had happened, I turned my head away in shame. I can't believe I did that. "Whatever…"

"I knew my strategy would work," she said with absolute satisfaction.

"What strategy?" I asked in curiosity.

"You didn't notice? I moved my face closer and closer, knowing it would make you nervous and cause you to look away."

"That's cheap," I said, feeling somewhat manipulated. I didn't look away because I was intimidated, but I guess it still had the desired effect.

"I'll do whatever it takes to win," she said proudly. "And don't you forget it." After seeing me sigh, she then leaned towards me again. "So what do I win?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Idiot! I won, so I get something, right?"

"You get bragging rights," I answered, turning away from her.

"Boo! Lame!" she yelled as she put me in a headlock. "I'm sure I can think of something."

"Let go…" I said as I struggled. "You're choking me."

Haruhi reluctantly let go. "Fine… but you owe me!"

"You're not getting a damn thing out of me!" I yelled bitterly. I knew it. The whole speech she gave about not owing anyone anything was a

big fat lie. Typical Haruhi…

"We'll see," she said, smiling evilly.

It was then that I felt a chill down my spine when I felt a cool gust of wind hit me. I realized that now was probably a good time to get going. "I'm getting sleepy. I'm heading to bed."

"Okay," said Haruhi, looking a bit disappointed.

I stood up and slowly made my way to the edge of the roof where Haruhi's window was. Just as I was about to reach it, I heard Haruhi's voice from behind.

"Kyon, wait!"

I turned around to find Haruhi also standing. She looked like she was holding something back. "There's something I need to tell you!"

It was then that I felt the flow of time begin to slow around me. My heart, even though it pounded, was beating at a snails pace. My eyes widened with the realization that she was about to say something… something huge! I tried to swallow, but the muscles in my throat where frozen in place. In fact, my whole body was frozen. I knew my fight or flight response was kicked in, but for some reason I could neither fight nor flee. All I could do was stand there and wait for what she was about to tell me.

"Kyon… I… I…" She reached out to me, beckoning me to come back. Her face was the epitome of desire and desperation.

This is it, isn't it? I wasn't sure what to feel about this moment, partly because I couldn't feel anything. I was totally numb, and now I could barely breathe. And the next words from her mouth were…

"… F… forget it…" Her eyes moved away from me and were diverted to the shingles of the roof.

The flow of time suddenly retuned to normal. I was able to move again, much to my relief. "What?"

"I said forget it! It was something stupid…" she yelled as she went and sat back down.

In a state of semi-shock, I decided to get down off the roof and make my way into my room. I don't remember changing into my pajamas before I laid down. It took a few minutes for me to recover my senses enough to reflect upon the day's events.

Today had been much more extraordinary than I had thought it would be, and not for the usual reasons. So much had happened between me and Haruhi, I would have thought a week had actually passed. But more importantly, was she… about to confess to me there? Just the thought of this puts me in a state of near panic. Only a mere eight days ago, I discovered that Haruhi had feelings for me, or more precisely, I found myself unable to deny it anymore. I came to the conclusion that I was fine with this as long as she kept it to herself, but today's events revealed something to me that I could no longer ignore. Sooner or later, Haruhi would no longer be content with keeping our relationship at the status quo. She was going to admit her feelings to me someday, whether I wanted her to or not.

And then there was the question of my feelings for her. I wasn't sure, but I think something was changing… maybe. I don't know what it was, but the damn dream I had was a part of it. And I almost kissed Haruhi yet again. What the hell is wrong with me? Am I that desperate that I'm starting to consider her a potential… girlfriend? The very thought of that set off warning klaxons going of in my head. No. I'm just acting funny because of the dream. Haruhi is my friend. Nothing more. I'm not going to let some stupid dream mess with my head. I'm sure that with a good nights rest, I'll be back to my usual self.

I'd rather not worry about this now. I'll figure it out later…

Okay, that's the end of the chapter. I just spend the entire night writing it. I'm sooo sleepy. And sorry that about the dream. I wrote that partially to mess with your head. Sorry if it did.

Anyway, I hope you guys enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it. See you soon!

Chapter 17

Words cannot describe that joy I feel when I continue to write this. And it's all thanks to you guys. You guys are the reason I push myself. I also think this story is that much better because of you guys (and girls! Can't forget the girls).

Anyway, I think one of my reviewers asked how far I am in the story. To be honest, I think I'm about 3/5 th done at this point, but anything can change. I do have the story mostly planned out, but things can change based on whether I feel something should be added or cut. The truth is, I don't want this story to end either, but I know that someday it must. Until then, let's just keep enjoying the ride.

Here's the next chapter. Enjoy!

Chapter 17

It's good to be back in the clubroom. I never thought I'd say that, but it was true. The events of last week are now a distant memory, and the Brigade was once again free to meet up here. Seeing Asahina-san in her maid outfit and drinking her tea completely enveloped me in absolute joy. I missed it way too much. It felt way too weird to not meet up after the end of class.

Unfortunately, Haruhi was true to her word that we'd be busy getting ready for Kyoto. Today, all five of us were using our own respective computers. For what reason? Well, our first order of business was to watch videos… every single one that contained something to do with James Randi. Haruhi gave a brief speech about how "it's important to learn as much as possible about the enemy before going to battle." Those are her words, not mine. I'd never say anything so idiotic.

And so, here I was constantly looking up videos about the guy, slowly becoming more and more bored. Glancing at Haruhi, I could see the fiery intensity in her eyes as she continued to watch whatever was on her screen. I wished I could be that excited about this. It didn't help that most of these videos were in English. Despite all the English classes I took during my years going to school, my English could best be described as semi-fluent. Well, that was being a little generous. I knew the basics, but my lack of actually practicing the language outside of class meant that nothing else ever stuck in my brain.

I began to wonder if anyone else was having the same problem. I figured that Haruhi and Koizumi probably understood all this better than I could. I knew that Haruhi's incredible brain would likely pick up on foreign languages better than most, and Koizumi likely had extensive training in any language his Organization needed him to learn. Nagato, on the other hand, I had no doubt her comprehension was perfect. Looking at her staring at the screen, I noticed that she barely ever moved unless it was to select the next video (she never used the mouse to do this, by the way). I don't even think she blinked. I then looked at Asahina-san. Poor Asahina-san. She looked even more confused than I did. I could tell she was trying in earnest to watch each and every video she could find, but I knew she couldn't make out any of what was being said.

After about ten more minutes, I looked at Haruhi again, finding her now leaning on her left hand while continuing to watch whatever she was watching. See? Even you are getting bored. Do we really have to do this? How the heck is this going to help with our goal to publicly humiliate an eighty year old foreign guy? It sure as hell isn't going to help me any. Could you at least enlighten me, just once, about the reasoning behind all this?

I then suddenly noticed her eyes divert themselves directly at me. I tried to turn my head and look at my screen as soon as possible, but it was too late.

"Stupid Kyon! Keep your eyes on the screen. Quit slacking!"

Yes your majesty. Wouldn't want to lose that precious point you awarded me that other day. I should protect it with my life. Who cares if Koizumi has something like 20,000 points? It's quality that counts, not quantity. Yeah, that's right. My point is better than all your points, Koizumi! Take that… Dammit, what the hell am I thinking? I'm so bored that even my thoughts are becoming completely incoherent.

After few more minutes, I looked at Haruhi yet again. This time she had a look of excitement again, even to the point where she was grinning. However, I also noticed that she was clicking furiously on my mouse. In other words, it was now painfully obvious that she wasn't watching videos anymore and was probably playing a game. Hypocrite! You force us to watch these stupid videos even when you can even do it yourself. I swear that it drives me absolutely…

"You seem distracted."

I was startled by the comment, causing me to snap to my front where Koizumi was seated. "Huh?'

"I just noticed that you seemed a bit preoccupied," said Koizumi with a smile that appeared to go the extra mile to annoy the hell out of me.

"I'm just bored because I can't really make out what's being said in these videos."

"Is that so? Perhaps I can be of assistance."

He then got up and walked over to my side of the table. He then leaned in to look at what was on my screen, getting way, way too close to me while doing so.

"Hmm… the description says that this video is about how the JREF worked the BBC to conduct an experiment to see if there was any truth behind homeopathy. Interesting…"

He then returned to his seat before asking a question, no doubt a prelude to another of his long line of boring expositions. "Do you know what homeopathy is?"

"Isn't that the practice of diluting some kind of medicine to ridiculous amounts, thinking it's supposed to work better?"

"That's a pretty general explanation. However, there's a bit more to it than that. Now bear in mind that I don't necessarily believe any of this is true."

So why are you talking about it. Who cares?

"The first principle of homeopathy is that "like cures like." In other words, if I was to be poisoned with, say, arsenic, the cure would be more arsenic."

Makes perfect sense. No wonder why people buy into it…

"The second principal is that the more you dilute that substance in water, the more potent the substance becomes. For instance…"

It was at this point that I completely lost interest and began to zone out. I looked at Haruhi once again. By now, she was obviously still playing the game, but a look of obvious frustration was now on her face. Obviously, the game's difficulty must have gone up significantly, causing her to lose patience.

It was then that I heard Koizumi chuckling. I looked at him again to see that his smile had grown even more irritating than before. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing."

Liar! Something is amusing you, and it appears to involve me. What the hell was I doing to…? Just as I was thinking that, I noticed my eye moving toward Haruhi again. It then hit me like a ton of bricks.

Looking back at him straight in the eyes, I then shook my head in denial. I leaned in a bit and lowered my voice.

"It's not what it looks like."

"What's not what it looks like?"

"Whatever you're thinking, you're wrong," I said growing increasingly irritated.

"I didn't say anything," said Koizumi, showing a mild hint of self-satisfaction that seemed to put the annoyance level of his smile over the roof.

You didn't have to. Your face says it all. It doesn't matter what he thinks. I was only staring at Haruhi because I was bored, and everyone else was just sitting there watching videos. She was the only one doing something different. That's my story and I'm sticking to it.

At the point, I made a conscious effort not to stare at her anymore. Instead, I tried staring at Asahina-san. Yes, doing that always makes me feel much better. Seeing her in that cute maid outfit while clumsily trying to use the computer was so incredibly cute. Yep, as much as I'd hate to admit it, Haruhi was right to buy that costume for her. Now that I think about, didn't Haruhi once say that she would wear it? Imagining her wearing that… DAMMIT!

"I need to use the bathroom," I said, desperately needing an excuse to go out and get some fresh air.

"Don't be long," commanded Haruhi. "You've been slacking enough as it is."

I ignored her remark and left the clubroom, heading directly for the roof. Being up there should definitely help clear my head. Wait… no. Bad idea. Being on the roof will remind me of what happened last night, considering it also happened on a roof. Then instead, I'll walk

outside and lay down by that tree. That'll be relaxing. After all, Haruhi likes to… on second thought, forget the tree. I know. I'll go out to the athletic field and sit on one of the benches for a while. I'm sure that won't remind me of her at all. Well, there was the time during the athletics festival that… dammit, isn't there any place I can go that doesn't remind me of her in some way?

I ultimately gave up and just decided to wander the halls for a while. Whether I liked to admit it or not, I found myself increasing compelled to stare at Haruhi. Even during class, I found myself turning to take quick glances at her several times, even when doing so seemed suspicious. I rubbed my face, trying to relieve my building stress. This compulsion was starting to really get to me. It had to stop. It's not like I'm in love if her or anything, right?

Eventually, I returned to the clubroom, only to find that Haruhi was now on her feet and pacing around the room. She turned to me and glared at me in annoyance. "About time! You were missing out on an important discussion!"

"About what?" I asked as I took my seat.

Haruhi slammed her hand down on the table, obviously trying to be dramatic. "We need funding for our trip to Kyoto! I wanted some ideas for how we're going to achieve this. After all, we need to purchase train tickets, reserve hotel rooms, as well as for food and other expenses."

"So what are you going to do?" I asked. Please tell me you're not going to try and take advantage of Asahina-san again, are you? She gets abused enough as it is.

"As popular as Mikuru-chan is, I'm not certain that exploiting her cuteness would be enough this time. We definitely need more than what we took in on the last fundraiser we did."

Haruhi was referring to the so-called "SOS Brigade's Belated Asahina Mikuru Handmade Valentine's Day Chocolate Amidakuji

Contest" that was held earlier this year. Even though that was a huge success (seeing Asahina-san in a miko outfit was incredibly awesome), I had to agree that the money we made would still be short of what would be needed.

"You have any ideas, Kyon? I already asked the others, but they haven't been able to come up with anything."

I have not the slightest clue. If I knew how to raise a huge sum of money in a short amount of time, I'd already be living in my own place comfortably, away some certain unwanted distractions. The deafening silence in the room raised the tension I felt quite a bit. I could tell that Nagato, Koizumi and Asahina-san were definitely not going to be of any help in this department, so it was likely up to either myself or Haruhi. Looking at her, I could see that she was becoming increasingly concerned. Obviously, if we didn't have the funds for the trip, it wouldn't happen.

Think… think… there must be something we could do. I briefly contemplated selling the pictures of Asahina-san that were still secretly hidden in the computer, but quickly decided against it when I realized that it would be a huge embarrassment to Asahina-san… not to mention that Haruhi would likely kill me if she ever found those. Okay, so what should we try instead? I continued to rack my brain for ideas. I delved as deep into my sub-conscious as I possibly could. A good idea was in there somewhere. I'm sure of it. Maybe I could ask Taniguchi for ideas. Then again, I somehow doubted that he would be of any help. Then again, as many of those magazines he probably reads, maybe there was something in there… hey there was something in that magazine I remembered reading recently.

"How about…" I almost said before stopping myself. Wait! Forget it. That's a bad idea.

"How about what?" asked Haruhi with obvious curiosity.

"Forget it. It's a bad idea," I said, hoping she'd drop it.

Unfortunately for me, she didn't. She circled around the table and leaned in close to my face. "If you have an idea, spit it out! I'll be the one who decides if it's a bad idea!"

Please don't make me say it. I'm begging you! To my chagrin, she continuously stared me down, making me increasingly nervous. The pressure she put on me, eventually became too much, so I eventually gave in and reluctantly told her my terrible idea.

"I… I was thinking… maybe we… could hold some kind of… tournament…"

"What kind of tournament?"

I swallowed hard before answering. "M… mud wrestling…"

Haruhi's expression quickly changed the moment those words left my mouth. She initially glared at me with a deadpan expression, but her eyes slowly narrowed as the idea sunk into her head. She continued to stare at me like this for at least a solid two minutes, her face uncomfortably close the whole time. Perhaps she remembered the article in the magazine she caught me reading, and now thought I was some kind of pervert. Whatever she was thinking, I just wished she stop staring at me already.

"Look, I told you it was a bad idea. Would you stop looking at me like that and just say no already?"

After I said that, Haruhi straightened up and put her hand under her chin, apparently entering deep thought. What, she not actually considering my idea, is she? Please, no! Forget I said anything!

To my dismay, Haruhi revealed a devilish grin before pointing directly at my nose. "Great idea, Kyon! A mud wrestling tournament is bound to bring in a ton of people and not just the fans of Mikuru-chan!"

I hung my head in despair. Why couldn't I have kept my mouth shut? It was incredibly embarrassing that the Brigade was actually going to

take part in something like this.

"Hmm, looks like we'll have to see if Tsuruya can help out, too. That'll even it out," said Haruhi, continuing to think out the details of our newest "plan." "We should also get some judges together to determine the winners of each match. I seriously doubt that those two idiots would say no."

Those two "idiots" that she's referring to were obviously Taniguchi and Kunikida, although it's a bit unfair to call them that. Kunikida is clearly not stupid.

"And we'll probably need a third judge…" said Haruhi as she continued to think. "I know! I bet Sakanaka will help! Having a girl in the judges panel will makes things more fair and balanced! Perfect!" She then stood up on her chair to make her final announcement. "Alright, everyone! This Friday, we're going to hold the Brigade's First Annual Stupendous Spring-time Mud Wrestling Tournament!"

First Annual? You mean you actually plan to have this thing held next year, too? Are you insane?

"For the next few days, we'll have to work hard to prepare for this Friday. That includes, of course, a huge marketing campaign that'll sweep through the school like a huge tsunami!"

And no doubt it'll cause just as much chaos. I had a serious question, however.

"Where the hell are we having this thing, anyway?"

Haruhi blinked at me, as if the answer should have been obvious. "We're going to have it out in the school's athletic field, of course. Where else would it be held?"

You're kidding, right? Of course you're not. You've never let a thing like school officials and rules stop you from anything. No doubt the

fact that the school failed to notice the last fundraising event has emboldened you more.

I looked at Asahina-san. She was cowering fear at the thought of this tournament. What have I done? There's no way she could stand up to the likes of Haruhi, Nagato, or Tsuruya-san. No matter who she's paired up with, she's toast. I'm so sorry, Asahina-san. You must hate me for all the suffering I'm causing you. If you never forgive, I'll understand…

"Oh, and one other thing. In case you we're wondering, you and Koizumi will be competing against each other, too."

"WHAT?!" I responded with absolutely baffling dread and horror. "Are you serious?"

"Of course I am," answered Haruhi with obvious annoyance. "Having you two wrestle will give something for the yaoi fangirl crowd to enjoy. Did you think only us girls would be involved? That's pretty sexist of you, Kyon."

While I certainly couldn't argue with her logic, the idea of wrestling with Koizumi… I think I'm going to be sick…

"I think it's a great idea, Suzumiya-san," said Koizumi. You bastard! You said that just to mess with me, didn't you?! You're so going to pay for that!

"Any other suggestions?" asked Haruhi.

"Can we do something else? Please?" I pleaded.

"Great! You're all dismissed so I can get started preparing. We're going to be busy all week, so be ready!"

Shoot me now. Seriously, if you can read this, come track me down and put a bullet through my cranium. Hell, I'll even give you directions to Haruhi's house so you can do it. Call me up and we'll

make arrangements. Just make sure you don't miss, okay? I don't want to feel a thing…

After we were all dismissed, we all began to walk home together, likely to walk to the usual meeting spot before parting ways. While doing so, I noticed Koizumi walking right up next to me, giving me the feeling that he had some things to discuss with me. I slowed down my pace a bit to put some distance between us and Haruhi and lowered my voice.

"What do you want?"

"Quite an interesting development, this tournament."

Look, if that's all you want to talk about, I'm walking away from you. I don't want to think about that stupid tournament.

"I'm just kidding," said Koizumi with his ever annoying smile. "I actually wanted to update you on a few things. I'm sure you've been curious yourself about last night."

To tell the truth, I was. In fact, I had planned on asking Koizumi about it eventually. I never got a chance to see either Oruki or Naru-san in the morning. My only guess was that they had gotten home so late that they were still passed out when Haruhi and I woke up. I guess now's as good a time as ever for an explanation. "So what happened?"

"Well, their reactions to the closed space were definitely different from yours. The closed space was a considerable distance away, so I had ample opportunity to elaborate on what I told them last Saturday. Naru-san seemed to absorb everything I said like sponge, while her husband… preferred to be difficult."

"Is that so?"

"It's almost as if he blames us for what's going on, even though his daughter is the one who wished for all of this."

"Oruki always seems to have trust issues. I'm sure he'll get over it."

"Yes, 'trust issues' is a good way to put it. I almost couldn't get him to enter the closed space. It was only when Naru-san pleaded with him to come that he relented."

"So what did they think of… those things?"

Their reactions were quite similar to the ones they had on Saturday. Seeing Suzumiya-san's mother act so pleasantly to the sight of such creatures was quite amusing. Oruki-san…" Koizumi trailed off a bit, a look of concern on his face. "I'm growing increasingly concerned about him."

"What's going to happen, then? Do your superiors know about all this?"

"Of course," he answered, barely keeping his smile. "They were not happy to hear about what happened. One of them wanted to have me reassigned. Fortunately, the others realized that doing so now would likely be a poor decision considering my role in the Brigade."

I would agree. I believe that everyone in the Brigade is important to Haruhi, each in their own way. If Koizumi were to suddenly disappear, it's likely that it could cause serious backlash that the Organization would rather not deal with. As protective as Haruhi is of all her members, it's likely that she'd drag us all to the ends of the earth to find Koizumi. And for some reason, this thought bothered me a bit. And no, it's not jealousy, okay?

Koizumi continued his explanation. "In any case, I've been given the burden of responsibility should anything happen as a result of Suzumiya-san's parents knowing the truth. Of course, I would be most appreciative if you could assist me in any way you can. Bringing the two of them to the closed space was supposed to help ensure their cooperation, but I'm still uncertain."

"Fine, I get it. I'll try talking to them when I get a chance, okay?"

"I appreciate it," said Koizumi just as we gathered at the meeting spot. "Well, I'll see you tomorrow, Kyon-kun."

Just before he left, I yelled out to him. "By the way, Koizumi, I intend to kick your ass this Friday! You hear me?" Koizumi turned to me one last time. If he was intimidated, he didn't show it. He just gave one last annoying smile before walking off. Bastard, I'll show him.

I felt a fist hit my arm from behind. I assumed it was Haruhi. "That's the spirit, Kyon! The more aggressive you are, the better the show we'll have for all the paying customers!"

I secretly wondered who she thought would win… better not ask. I'd rather not know.

When the two of us returned, Naru-san was up and about, informing me that Oruki wanted me to mow the lawn today. I was even permitted to use the gas powered mower this time, much to my relief. She also leaned into my ear and told me that the "giant, blue people" were really cool, and that my "smiling friend" was awesome. Again, I wasn't jealous of him.

To be honest, I actually never used a gas powered mower before, so I had to have Haruhi show me how to get the thing running. That was embarrassing. Anyway, mowing the lawn this time was a breeze, and I was finished in half the time that it took last time. After putting the mower away, I went inside to go and relax.

When I got inside, I saw Haruhi sitting at the dining room table doing homework. I also saw her mother standing next to her talking about something. My curiosity getting the better of me, I snuck up to the door to the dining room to listen.

"I need you to do me a big favor," said Naru-san.

Haruhi continued to work on her homework, only half-acknowledging her mother. "What?"

"I want you to wish for ghosts to appear."

What?! What the hell does she think she's doing? Don't tell me she's trying to do what I think she's trying to do.

Haruhi finally took her eyes off her homework and gave her mother a strange look. "You want me to what?"

Naru-san bounced excitedly as she explained. "I have a feeling that if you wish for ghosts to appear, we'll finally get some!"

"Mom, you can't just wish for ghost to appear. It doesn't work that way."

Thank god that Haruhi is not all that impressionable, or else we'd all be over run with stupid ghosts all over the place.

"I understand what you're saying, Haru-chan, but I really, really have this strong feeling that if 'you' wished for ghosts to appear, they would."

It was at this point that I realized I had to step in, for the sake of the universe. "Uh… Naru-san, can I talk to you outside for a minute?"

"Huh," answered Naru-san innocently, her charming smile still in full display. "Okay!" She then happily followed me out the door.

Just as we were outside, safe from Haruhi's prying ears, I placed my hands on Naru-san's shoulders and scowled at her sternly. "You can't do that!" I hissed.

Naru-san expression immediately changed, looking like a puppy who was being yelled at for peeing on the floor. "I can't?"

"No!" I yelled, very adamant that she understands what I'm trying to tell her. "Please, do not try and manipulate your daughter into using her powers. Please!"

Naru-san pouted in sadly. "That's no fair! I finally have the chance to see some real ghosts, and I can't take advantage of it!"

I did feel pretty bad that I had to upset her like this. As sweet as she is, scolding her was a bitter experience. "Please understand that it's way too dangerous to try and get her to activate her powers. Do you understand?"

Naru-san looked at me with a quivering frown. "Can I at least have her make me one tiny, itty-bitty, little ghost?"

"No."

Naru-san hung her head in sadness, obviously disheartened to hear me put my foot down. She eventually nodded her head and walked back into the house. I was relieved to know that she finally understood. When I went back inside, I was called over by Haruhi. I was a little worried when she did. I hoped she wasn't suspicious over what happened.

"What was that about?" she asked.

I thought as quickly as possible to come up with an excuse. "Uh… I was just asking her to… stop messing with you."

Haruhi raised an eyebrow at me. "Dummy, I don't need you to do that. I've been dealing with her a lot longer than you have."

I was relieved that she bought it. "Well, I'm heading upstairs." To be honest, I was still feeling very uncomfortable around her, and I needed to get away from her.

"You're not going anywhere," she commanded as she pointed to a chair opposite of her. "You're going to finish your homework. I told you already that as long as you live in this house, you're not allowed to slack on any of it."

Cursing myself for my misfortune, I reluctantly grabbed my school books and sat down across from her. I tried my best to do my school work, but the fact that Haruhi was right in front of me made for an enormous distraction. I really didn't want to be near her right now. It was so annoying finding myself looking up at her every five seconds.

Unfortunately, Haruhi caught me glancing at her. "What are you looking at?"

"N… nothing," I lied, trying again to continue my homework.

"What's wrong with you?" asked Haruhi, looking concerned. "You've been acting weird all day."

"Don't worry about," I spoke, doing what I could to ignore her.

Haruhi immediately got up and walked around the table. She then grabbed me by my shirt and pulled me to her face. "Don't lie to me! The last time you acted weird, you were hiding something! What are you hiding now?"

Please let me go. Being this close to your face is freaking me out. I don't know why, but I was almost in a state of panic. I had to think of an excuse. Anything!

"Hurry up and answer!"

Her breath smelled surprisingly sweet… no, stop! Think, damn you. Think, think, think, think, think, think, think, think… I got it!

"I'm just getting worried that I won't find a place to live before the end of the month."

Haruhi blinked, surprised by my answer. "Oh… is that it?" She then let go of me and sat back down in her seat. "Idiot! You're overreacting. Do you need more time to look?"

After letting my relief flow through me and taking a deep breath, I sat down and answered. "I think I'm going to have to take the whole

weekend and look."

"Fine, we'll just have to look some more this Saturday."

That's no good. If Haruhi came with me, she'd just ruin everything all over again. Besides, I really needed time away from her. I had to come up with an excuse. "Wait, won't you have some things you have to do for the Brigade? You're going to have to buy some train tickets and make other preparations, aren't you?"

Haruhi stared at me for a bit and sighed. "You're right…" She then rested her head on her left hand. "I've got too much to do this weekend. Fine, just don't slack on it, okay? Anyway, even if you don't find anything, it's not a big deal. I'm sure if you talk to my dad, he'd probably give you an extension or something."

"What makes you think that?"

"When my dad first said you could only stay a month, he didn't know you. But now he's gotten to know you a lot better. Besides, you always do whatever we tell you to do, you act politely enough, and, heck, my mom adores you. As long as you pay the rent at the end of the month, I'm sure he'd let you stay."

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I'd hoped she was right, but I knew I couldn't count on Oruki letting me stay here longer, especially after what recently happened. "I'll talk to him later, but it's best that I don't take any chances." I then noticed that I hadn't seen Oruki since I got home. "Where's your father, anyway?"

"Mom said he still wasn't feeling well. It's weird. He's almost never sick."

How much longer was that guy going to hide away in his room? For someone who acted pretty tough a week ago, he certainly wasn't acting very macho now.

Anyway, I eventually finished my homework, despite certain distractions, and I went upstairs to find some sanctuary. Needing a diversion badly, I eventually picked up Nagato's book again and began to read it. I had hoped that it would help clear my thoughts, but instead all it did was remind me of Haruhi even more. Seriously, every other damn haiku seemed to remind me of her in some way, shape or form. I almost shut it in frustration, until I came across a very strange haiku.

When confronting her.

He held on the stage's edge.

He then let it go.

It was an incredibly bizarre haiku. It didn't make a bit a sense and was completely out of place among all the other haikus in the book. Why would the author of this book think that haiku was any good? I certainly didn't understand its symbolism.

I heard a knock on my door, removing my attention from the book. It was dinner time, and I was more than happy to get up and eat something. The rest of the day was uneventful, with the exception of Oruki who still didn't appear at the table. I went to bed shortly after I'd finished dinner, hoping that sleep would allow me refuge.

And no, I'm not going to summarize today's events. I don't want to think about any of it. I'm going to sleep. Leave me alone…

Well, I wonder what that haiku was talking about. ;) Anyway, as always I hope this chapter was enjoyable. I have more updates for you soon.

See ya!

Chapter 18

Well, there's nothing more for me to do than to start up the next chapter. For once, I don't have a ton of things to say that I haven't already said. Once again, thank you for all the support!

Hope you enjoy the chapter!

Chapter 18

This week was going way too slowly. That's all I had to say about that. I desperately wanted it to be Saturday already. Obviously, this meant that it was definitely not Saturday right now. Hell, it wasn't even Friday. It was only Tuesday! Dammit, I want this week to end!

Why did I want it to end so badly? Simple. I was still loathing the fact that not only did I have to help the barely sane Haruhi with the setting up and promoting of this Friday's fundraiser, I had to actually participate in it! I'm sure you remember by now that we're having a good old-fashioned mud wrestling tournament. Well, technically it's a mini-tournament, unless by some miracle Haruhi manages to convince enough girls (and guys) to also take part in it.

Fortunately, most of the students in this school are entirely rational people and would never dare humiliate themselves for the sake of the Brigade. Of course, it's perfectly within Haruhi's capability to try and blackmail some of them. I hope she doesn't do that.

I flung my pen into the air and tried to catch it, bored out of my mind. I was successful and decided to toss it in the air again. This time I missed, and the pen bounced off my fingers and landed on my lap. I barely managed to catch it before it landed on the floor.

Oh yeah, incase you're still wondering, I'm in class right now. I'm not assuming that you're too dumb to figure that out or anything it's

just… never mind…

I felt a pen or pencil poke me from behind, a clear indication that a certain Brigade commander wanted my attention. I leaned my head back as far as I could until her sharp, glowing orbs met my own. "What's up?"

She then poked my nose with her pen, making me wonder if it was being marked with ink. "Makes sure you talk to those two during lunch."

"Yeah, yeah I know," I answered as I sat back up and rubbed my nose. I checked my finger to make sure that there was no ink on it. I didn't see any ink on my finger, so I had hoped that my nose went unmarked. Why couldn't she use her finger or something? I remembered a few times I've had to use a spot remover on my shirts because she got ink on them. It's so annoying.

When fourth period class was finished, I got together with Taniguchi and Kunikida for our daily ritual of eating lunch together. To be honest, since I already knew that Taniguchi would freak out when I told him that we were going to have him judge a mostly all-girls mud wrestling contest, so I decided I was going to mess with him.

"Yo, Kyon. How's life going for ya?" asked Taniguchi while opening the top to his bento box. "Got any exciting adventures lined up between you and "you-know-who."

By now, I should be used to his teasing over me and Haruhi, but it still irks the hell out of me. Nevertheless, the answer to his question was "Yes."

"Oh, I see," Taniguchi said as he winked at me. Just calm down. Soon enough you'll make him pay for his teasing. "Where to?"

"The Brigade is going to Kyoto next weekend."

"Hey, I've been there," added Kunikida. "It's a nice place to visit. Lots of religious sites all over the place. Wouldn't mind going there again someday."

"Why would Suzumiya-san want to go to a place like that?" asked Taniguchi as he stuffed a piece of fried fish in his mouth.

"Haruhi's hatched some insane plan to try and publicly humiliate as guy named James Randi."

"Who?" asked Taniguchi stupidly. Figures he wouldn't know who he was. Well, I could imagine the average lay-person not knowing about him.

"Never mind," I said in slight annoyance. "It's not important who he is or why she thinks he's such a threat to her and her club. What matters now is the fact that we need money for the trip."

"How're going to get the money for that?" asked Kunikida.

"We're holding a fundraiser this Friday."

Taniguchi gave an evil smile when he heard this. "Ah, fundraiser, huh? Are you guys going to sell revealing picks of Mikuru Asahina?"

"Nope."

"Are you going to have some kind of drawing where the winner gets a kiss right on the lips from Mikuru-chan?"

"No."

"Are you going to dress her in funny outfits and charge money for people to have our picture taken with her?"

"Try again."

Taniguchi continued to wrack his brain for more possibilities but eventually gave up. "Just tell me, man."

Time to set the bait. "We're holding a mud wrestling tournament."

Taniguchi's eyes widened in absolutely, unimaginable, ecstatic joy. "Are you kidding me?!"

"Looks like Suzumiya-san's really trying to outdo herself this time," said Kunikida.

Now for the fun part. "We still need judges for it, though."

Predictably, Taniguchi grabbed me by my shoulders and begins to plead with me. "You've got to get me on the judge's panel. You have to!" I couldn't help but smell the scent of fried fish and wasabi in his breath. "I'll do anything!"

I tried to keep a straight face while he was doing this. I wanted to give him the impression that I wasn't sure. I gave an expression that indicated that I was mulling it over.

Taniguchi picked up on this and upped the ante. "Heck, you can have that magazine I gave you back. I never wanted it anyway. Hell, you can have all of my magazines, even the 'naughty' ones."

That's quite alright. I don't even want to think about the fact that you have those things.

"Or maybe I'll buy lunch for you everyday for a week. That's sounds fair right. Or maybe I'll buy you a bunch of meat buns and you can stuff your face. That's sounds good to you, right?"

I turned to Kunikida, still trying to stay straight-faced. "You want to be one of the judges?"

"Sounds great," answered Kunikida eagerly.

Taniguchi's jaw dropped when I did that. He backed up a bit, not really sure how to react. After a few seconds, I saw his face slowly contort into anger, obviously hurt. "I get it. I see how it is. You've been buddies with Kunikida here since junior high, so you decide to

give him special treatment, but I'm not good enough." He then points a finger directly at me. "Well, you can just go to hell, Kyon! You and all your friends! I don't need any of you! I'm perfectly fine by myself!"

I continued to eat my lunch, savoring it just as much as I was savoring Taniguchi's idiocy. He really was a poor dope. I'm starting to see why it is that Koizumi likes to mess with me so damn much. It's a lot of fun, isn't it?

He put his hands on my shoulders again, his face full of desperation again. I found his emotional one-eighty to be extremely amusing. "I take that back. I totally didn't mean it. You're not mad at me, are you? I'm totally sorry. I'll do anything. I swear!"

My eyes darted toward Kunikida. By now, his face was beet red and he had a hand over his mouth, obviously dying from laughter. I could tell that he'd figured out what I was doing and was trying not to blow my cover. To be honest, I was having a hard time, too. It took all of my will power not to crack a smile and bust out laughing. Taniguchi was just way too pathetic.

"Look, I'll even stop messing with you about you and Suzumiya-san. You know I was only joking about you two, right?"

Bingo! Finally! Maybe now I can finally eat my lunch in peace. "… I guess it's okay if you judge, too."

Taniguchi raised both fists in the air in triumph, howling in excitement. He grabbed my shoulders once again, shaking me back and forth. "You're the best! You and Suzumiya-san! I take back everything I've ever said about you two!"

Hey, what have you been saying about me behind my back. I demand answers, dammit!

"Go ahead and tell Suzumiya-san that I won't let her down! Also tell her that she's the most awesome person on the planet!"

The moron then finally sits down to allow us to finish lunch. Well, all we needed was Sakanaka-san to join the panel and we were set on judges. Haruhi insisted that she ask her, saying that it would be easier to get her to join if a girl asked her. I agreed with her reasoning. I would've been way too awkward for me to ask her for such a ridiculous favor.

Haruhi soon returned from lunch about five minutes before fifth period was scheduled to start. I returned to my desk to inform her of the news. "They agreed to help."

Haruhi stared out the window, a satisfied smirk in her face. "Of course they would. Any guy with half a brain would kill for that kind of opportunity."

"By the way, Taniguchi says he won't let you down," I said, barely able to keep myself from laughing. "And that you're the most awesome person on the planet."

"He's so predictable," said Haruhi as she grabbed her notebook and pen from her desk. "And it goes without saying that I'm the most awesome person on the planet. I am the founder of the SOS Brigade, after all." I didn't hear the slightest hint of modesty or sarcasm from her. She glowed with a confidence I couldn't help but admire. Oh man, there it is again. I better turn my head to the front and try not to stare at her again.

After the end of sixth period, Haruhi and I made our way to the clubroom to continue our much needed preparations for this Friday. I would be lying if I said that I was looking forward to any of this. Hell, I didn't even want to go on this stupid trip to Kyoto. I would be much more content to just sit in the clubroom while drinking tea and playing stupid board games. Nevertheless, I knew that even a pseudo-club like ours would have to do something once in a while. I just wish it didn't involve me.

Maybe I'm looking at this the wrong way. After all, this Friday I'm going to get front row seats to watch four gorgeous, scantily-clad

girls fighting each other in a pit of mud in a no-holds-bar match to the very finish. And my price for admission? I had to do the same against Koizumi. That shouldn't be too bad, right? I mean, since the girls had to deal with wrestling someone of the same sex, it would only be fair if Koizumi and I sucked it up and did it too. I'll just try and think about pleasant things while enduring the inevitable match between the two of us. I still intended to kick his ass, though.

When we both entered that clubroom, I was surprised to find that Tsuruya-san was already inside waiting for us. She practically bounded towards us like a gazelle that was chased by a cheetah.

"Hey guys! What's up? Mikuru-chan totally told me about what's happening this Friday, nyoro~!"

"I take it that you've agreed to help?" I asked.

She wrapped her arm around my head and pulled me down under her armpit. "Damn right, I'm totally going to help! I'm like totally megas excited to kick some butt!" She then leaned her head in closer whispering to me in an almost purring fashion. "I totally heard that this was your idea! Naughty boy! It figures that you'd be the type to want to see all of us in bathing suits gettin' all rough and dirty, nyoro~!"

Uh, no. Don't confuse me with someone like Taniguchi. I'm not like that at all, I swear. Oh, and by the way, there's a certain someone who's watching us right now who might get a little upset if you don't let go. I'm just warning you now.

She let me go after that and bounced back to the front of the room. I looked at Haruhi after that, immediately noticing a look of suspicion on her face. I could only respond by shrugging, giving her the non-verbal cue that nothing was going on. She seemed to have dropped it after that.

The next couple hours after everyone arrived involved mostly the planning of what was going to happen on Friday. The arrangements

were going to be as follows:

1. The event was not going to happen until around the time when most of the clubs were usually dismissed. Doing this would help ensure that as many people would show up as possible. It would also give us time to set up the ring and any tables that would be needed.

2. The ring itself was going to be about 10 meters in diameter and would be completely round. This would give ample room to move around in. No doubt Koizumi and I would be spending the better part of tomorrow digging up as much dirt as possible so we could use as the base for our mud. As to where we were going to store all that dirt until we needed it, I left that part up to Haruhi. I knew I would be loathing the hard work too much to care.

3. Tickets would be sold just before the event. The price of admission would be 1500 yen for a standard ticket and 2000 yen for the front row. There would also be drinks available for an inflated price.

4. Each round would be ten minutes. That sounded like a long time, but Haruhi insisted that these matches were meant to be a show for the audience, and we're not supposed to try and hurt each other. All we needed to do was put on a good show. The judge's decisions would be based on whoever put on the best show. Despite knowing this, I had my suspicions that Haruhi was still going to go all out anyway. She's way too competitive not to.

5. There would be two rounds between the girls, followed by my match with Koizumi. After our match, the winners of the first two matches would square off to decide who the champion was.

"What kind of awesome prizes do we get if we wins?" asked Tsuruya-san excitedly.

Haruhi put her hand on her chin and thought it over. "I hadn't thought about that. I suppose a prize should be in order…" She raised her

fist in the air. "Whoever wins will be the Brigade Chief during entire trip to Kyoto!"

"What happens if Tsuruya-san were to win?" I asked. "Is she even coming with us?"

Tsuruya-san shook her head disappointedly. "I gots relatives coming over that weekend. It megas sucks."

"In the event that Tsuruya wins the event, I will stand in for her as leader for the trip."

Of course you would. I seriously doubt Nagato or Asahina-san would want the position of Brigade Chief for the trip, anyway. It's a crappy prize if you ask me.

"I'm curious," said Koizumi. "Is there a prize available to whoever wins our match?"

Haruhi though about it briefly before answering. "You guys can fight over the position of Vice-Chief during the trip!"

That's an even crappier prize than the one the girls are fighting for. Since Koizumi never actually orders anyone around, he's pretty much just Vice-Chief in name only. Not that I still wouldn't mind winning the position from him, even if it was only temporary. No, it's not that I'm jealous of him out-ranking me, I just would like to be able to rub it in his annoying face every once in a while.

"All that's left to decide now is who is facing off against who!" announced Haruhi. To do this, she ripped off four pieces of paper and marked two. They were then folded up and placed inside a tin where all four of them would pick out a piece of paper. The two who had the marked papers would be facing off against one another. Obviously, this meant that those with unmarked papers would also be the facing each other.

The drawing began with all four girls standing in the front of the room. Haruhi told them not to open the papers until she said so. After she put the tin down, she waited a few moments to build up the tension before telling everyone to open them up.

From my angle, I couldn't see what everyone had so I tried to figure it out based on their reactions. Nagato's expression was completely indifferent. That was to be expected. She'd probably react that way no matter who she was paired off against.

The same could be said about Asahina-san. As expected, she whimpered in fear upon discovering who she was paired against. As I said before, Asahina-san was clearly no match for any of the other three girls. Heck, if she were to face off against my little sister in a match, I'd probably bet on my sister winning. No offense Asahina-san. I'm really sorry about all this. Just remember that you only need to put on a good show and not worry about winning.

Haruhi had a satisfied grin on her face upon opening her paper, while Tsuruya-san began to laugh in her unusual way upon seeing hers.

"Oh man, I'm toast!" said Tsuruya-san with a huge smile that made her fang clearly evident.

Okay, the suspense was too much. I needed to know now. "Who got the marked papers?"

Both Haruhi and Tsuruya-san showed their papers, which were clearly marked. It was official then. It was Nagato vs. Asahina-san and Haruhi vs. Tsuruya-san. I was starting to wonder if Haruhi subconsciously manipulated the result because she wanted to ensure that she would have a chance to face off against her. No doubt she likely still harbored some resentment over that stupid hypothetical I shouldn't have ever asked her.

The club meeting was dismissed shortly after that, and we all went out separate ways to go home. While on the way home, I found

myself haven't a hard time not want to steal more glances at Haruhi. I had hoped that the desire to do so would go away today, but it hasn't. It was starting to really get to me. I had this sneaking notion as to why this was, but I kept it in the back of my mind. It had to be wrong. I refused to admit it to myself.

Anyway, when the two of us finally returned home, I didn't even have time to put my bag down before Oruki immediately marched up to me. He immediately grabbed me by the collar and began to pull me out the door.

"We need to talk," he grunted without missing a beat.

"Hold on. Stop!" I yelled while trying to resist. Don't I at least get a chance to settle down before you yank me to god knows where? I knew my resistance was futile. Oruki's strength was just as overwhelming as ever, and I soon realized that all I could do was to cooperate. I looked at Haruhi one last time before the car started up and drove off. She had a look of mild concern as she saw us speeding away. She never tried to save me, though. Maybe she knew that her father wasn't actually going to hurt me.

I, on the other hand, was not so sure. Looking at Oruki, I saw an expression of dead seriousness. No… scratch that. He looked pissed. I seriously began to fear for my life again, especially when I realized that we weren't heading in the direction of the dojo. Instead, we seemed to be taking a route that would lead us out of the city.

I know what's going to happen. Oruki's lost his mind, and he's going to murder me and dump my lifeless body out in the middle of nowhere. Then he'll go home and pretend that nothing happened. Sure, Haruhi and Naru-san would probably be suspicious as to what could have happened, but whoever said crazy people were good at thinking things through. By the time they figured everything out, I would be half-consumed by maggots.

I sat motionlessly for about a half-an-hour as we drove further and further out into the country-side. Every time I glanced at Oruki, his

expression never changed. What the hell was going through his head right now? I knew for a while that he wasn't dealing with the whole "your daughter is god" thing very well. I expected the worst when the car eventually slowed down and turned onto what appeared to be an entrance to a park.

The road we were now on bended and turned with the mountain we were on, seemingly taking us nowhere in particular. This made me even more nervous, as by now I was starting to think that my earlier suspicions were right. We didn't come to a stop until we came to an overhang where Oruki parked the car.

The place we stopped at had a clear view of the sun slowing starting to set in the distance. For miles on end, we were surrounded by trees and mountains. The overhang had a railing designed to prevent people from falling over. I began to become a bit confused by the choice of location. If this was supposed to be the site of my murder, it was an odd one, unless he planned to throw me over the edge and let me fall to my death.

Oruki stepped out and sat on the hood of his car. He began to stare at the landscape, not making a sound. He sat there, unmoving, for a full five minutes without moving a muscle. His expression softened considerably, a clear indication that he was starting to calm down. When I saw this, I started to realize that perhaps Oruki went here because this place had a soothing effect on him. I had to admit that it was a beautiful, serene location. Just like how laying on the roof made Haruhi feel better, perhaps this place had the same effect on her father.

Realizing that perhaps I wasn't in danger, I slowly exited the car and approached the front of it. I didn't sit down on the car, instead deciding to stand there and stare out into the country side as well. I didn't bother to glance back at him until he finally spoke.

"You knew about the giants, right?"

"Yep."

"You've seen them, too?"

I nodded, wondering where he was going with this.

"You're a freak, just like the rest of them," he said before shaking is head and looking at the ground. His voice lacked any real enthusiasm or excitement. I didn't take the insult too personally. How could I disagree? After all the things I've been through, I had no choice but to admit that I was at least somewhat abnormal. I didn't need strange powers to know that.

"How do you deal with it?" asked Oruki.

"With what?" I asked back, not really sure what his question meant.

"With… everything! The aliens, time travelers, espers, Haruhi, all of it!"

This was a difficult question to answer. Indeed, even I am not completely certain with how I managed not to lose my sanity after all I have been through. One thing was for certain, though. I was still sane, and I'm quite proud of that fact, thank you very much.

"I just take things one day at a time," I answered. It was the best I could come up with.

"That smiling guy even told me that on the Monday before that I nearly destroyed the world when I banned my daughter from her club. How the hell am I supposed to react to that?"

I don't know. Tell the Organization that you're sorry? They had a pretty rough couple days after that. Oh and by the way, it was the universe that was in danger, not just the world.

"And let me ask you something else. That night, when you stood up to me, were you only doing it to save the world?"

"It was more than that," I answered honestly. "But that was a primary motivator."

"How can I be a decent father if I have to worry that anything I say could potentially end everything?"

I wish I could tell you. You're definitely not in an enviable position.

"How many times have I been close to ending the world just because I had a shouting match with my daughter? Do you have any idea how disturbing it is to know that?"

I've got a pretty decent idea. I know I've caused a few of those closed spaces to appear, too.

"Hell, that's not even all of it. Just yesterday, I remember looking out the outside of my house, and for half a second, I was sure I saw someone staring at me from a house a half block down the road. I began to think to myself 'How long have we been watched like this?' My every move has likely been monitored for the last four years. I can't get over it."

To someone who wouldn't know better, he may have sounded disturbingly paranoid, but I knew his senses were keen enough for it to be possible that he saw something. Knowing what I know, it was perfectly plausible to suspect that someone was watching him, and likely all of us.

"Just a few days ago, the only things I had to worry about were providing for my family, and making sure my daughter grew up to a productive member of society. Now…" He trailed off, obviously not sure of what to say next. "I just… I just wanted to enjoy a normal, every day life. I didn't ask for this."

"Nobody asked for this," I responded. "But it's how things are. Like it or not."

"My wife thinks that this is all a big game to her. She's loving every minute of it. I don't think he realizes what this really means for all of us. The normal life we had was all an illusion. We'll never have that illusion back again."

Well… I know a certain someone who "could" bring back that illusion, but I've already told her that I was against the whole thing.

"And what about my daughter? There's no way in hell that she'll ever have a normal life now. How could it be possible after all this?"

"That's not true," I retorted. "Look, despite her powers, she's been living a relatively normal life for the last four years. Believe me when I say that everyone involved wants nothing more than for Haruhi to have a normal life, completely and blissfully ignorant of her powers forever." Whether or not this was for Haruhi's sake was unclear, although I couldn't help but agree. Haruhi should never learn the truth.

"I don't think I could ever look at her the same way again," said Oruki. "Every time I look at her, I feel sick inside. It's like I'm looking at a completely different person."

I was a little upset at this, and I had decided to voice how I felt. "How can you say that? Look, I can understand that this was a lot to take in and that you would've probably been happier not knowing it. But that doesn't change the fact that she's still your daughter. Nothings changed about her since you found out the truth. Haruhi is still Haruhi, and she'll always be who she is. You can't just hide from her because the truth is inconvenient. Even if she doesn't know it, she still needs you to be there for her. And I know she loves you, even if you're a pain in the ass."

I shouldn't have said that last part. I cringed for a minute, worried he might hit me, but he didn't. He just continued to stare out into space, his expression completely blank. He was like that for another two minutes before a small smile crept up on to his face.

"You know what? You're right. I am a pain in the ass."

I was relieved to hear that he wasn't pissed of at me. In fact, it seemed like he was feeling better. He lifted himself off his car and stood up. He took a deep breath and took in the sights one last time.

"I need to stop feeling sorry for myself. Hell, if you can deal with this, why can't I?" He then looked directly at me, his mouth displaying a full, toothy grin. "You know what I'm in the mood for? Exercise! What do you say?"

No! No, I'm not in the mood for exercise! Please, anything but that!

"Great!" he yelled as he grabbed me by the shoulder and threw me into the passenger seat of the car. Before long, he was in his seat and driving away, leaving me in a huge pit of despair.

"Oh, and no holding back this time! You can't fool me anymore! I saw what you did to that monster! I can't believe I actually thought you were weak!"

Uh… no! What you saw was a complete fluke! It might have looked like I knew what I was doing, but I was just reacting instinctively the whole time! You believe me right? Right?

I'm now lying on my bed… completely exhausted. It was brutal enough just trying to climb up the stairs when I got back. This was quite possibly the most exhausting "exercise" session I've had yet. To my complete and total lack of surprise, it turned out that it was actually a bad idea to call Oruki a pain in the ass. After a large regiment of brutal exercises and training lessons, I was practically begging him to stop. You know what he said? "I wouldn't be a pain in the ass if I stopped now!" Bastard! See if I ever talk to you again. If there were any saving graces, I could think of two. One, he taught me a few techniques that were useful in grappling (which I fully intend to use on Koizumi for sure), and two, he actually let me dress myself for a change. I can't tell you how happy it made my feel to know I wasn't going to be humiliated like that again. My body might be wrecked, but at least my dignity was still in one piece. There was one problem, though…

I still needed to do my homework…

I managed to lug my school bag into my room and next to the bed. I slowly turned towards it a few inches at a time. I then let my arm fall lazily onto my bag and grabbed the handle. I then stayed in this position for a full five minutes before I finally gathered the will to try and lift it. The bag felt five times heavier than normal, making this task laborious. I had to put my other hand underneath it to left it high enough to get it on the bed. I dropped it right next to me, letting it bounce on my bed a few times before it came to a rest leaning on my belly. So far, so good. Now I need to open the damn thing. It's amazing how the most trivial of things can be so arduous when your strength is reduced to that of a kitten.

Just as I was about to open the bag, I overheard a conversation that was happening in Haruhi's room. Based on the pitch of the voices, I could tell it was Haruhi and Naru-san. I wanted to get up and try and get a better listen to what they were talking about, but I was way too weak to get up. I tried my best to make out what they were talking about. From what I could tell, it sounded like Naru-san wanted to talk to Haruhi about something. I wasn't quite able to make out what Haruhi said, but her responses were rather short and to the point, an indication that maybe she wasn't in the mood for conversation. After a while, I heard Naru-san say something along the lines "sorry to bother you" and then close the door to her room.

A second later, I heard the door to my room open up, revealing a distraught looking Naru-san, whining and pouting in her incredibly cute manner.

"Kyon-kun, help me! She still won't talk to me! I keep trying, but she still hates me! I know it!"

Uh… Naru-san? Yeah… you do realize your daughter can hear you, right? Of course you wouldn't. This isn't your room after all, is it?

Naru-san walks up to me and grabs me by my shoulders. She then begins to shake me like a rag-doll. "You have to think of something!"

Being wore out like I was, I was helpless to stop her from shaking me. "Naru-san… please… stop… and… I'll… see… what… I… can… do…"

She finally stopped shaking me and smiled weakly. "I'm sorry to bother you like this. I'm such a burden, I know."

"Don't worry about it," I said as I forced myself to sit up. My stomach muscles yelled at me for making them flex once again, but I had to ignore them for the time being. "Look, I'll talk to her, okay? I'll assure her that she can trust you."

Naru-san was about to hug me, but I put my hands up just in time, telling her that I was hurting too much for a hug. She understood and nodded, turning around to prepare to leave. As she reached the door, she turned to me one last time. "Oh, I was going to ask. I noticed Oruki-kun looking a lot better when you two came back? What did you say to him? I've been trying to make him feel better for days, and it wasn't working."

"I told him he was a pain in the ass."

Naru-san immediately busted out laughing, obviously finding what I said to be more than amusing. They say there's little that's funnier than the truth, and no matter how you slice it, there was no denying that he was a genuine pain in the ass.

After Naru-san finished laughing, she gave me a quick bow. "Dinner will be ready soon!" She then left my room, closing the door behind her.

No sooner than when she left that I heard sounds coming from Haruhi's room. I knew immediately that in about two seconds that she was going to knock on my…

I facepalmed the moment I heard it. I painfully got up and approached the window. After opening it, I was once again greeted

by the sight of Haruhi's head upside-down. I know I've said this more than once before, but seeing her upside-down like that was always cute. I couldn't get over it. Too bad her expression told me that she was less than amused.

"What were you and my mom talking about?"

Hey, you know what? I just discover this thing called a door. Have you thought about using that? I'm pretty sure you've used it before.

"Shut up, Kyon! Don't give me any smart-ass remarks! Just answer the question!"

I sighed heavily when I heard the question, knowing that what her mother just did looked incredibly suspicious. I knew that it really wasn't that big a deal, though, so I decided to be completely honest with her.

"She's been asking me for some advice on how to get you to open up to her. She thinks you hate her or something."

Haruhi rolled her eyes when she heard this. "She can be such a dummy sometimes. I don't hate her. I just don't feel comfortable talking to her, for reasons I already explained."

"Look, you don't have to tell her anything important, just have a conversation with her once in a while. Just to let her know you care."

"Idiot, I don't need you to tell me what to do." She then lowered her voice a bit. "I want to trust her, but…"

"I already told her she needs to learn to keep things a secret. I think she understands."

"It's not that she doesn't understand. It's just totally against her nature. It's like you trying not to be an idiot."

Hey! I resent that! Just because I'm not as smart as you or Koizumi or Nagato or Kunikida or… never mind. I'm not stupid, dammit!

"Just give her a chance, Haruhi," I said, trying to sound as understanding as possible. "It's not asking much."

Haruhi gave a deep sigh before answering. "Fine… I'll try. But if it backfires, you're in big trouble!"

What else is new?

"By the way," said Haruhi as a large smile crept up on her face. "Did you really tell my dad that he was a pain in the ass?"

"Yup."

Haruhi had a quick laugh at that, which kinda made me chuckle a bit. It was pretty funny, I guess.

"I'm surprised he didn't kill you for that!"

"He kinda did," I said as I rubbed my arm, indicating my soreness.

Just as Haruhi was about to say something else, we both heard someone approaching. Haruhi was quick to duck back into her room before my door opened, revealing Naru-san.

"Dinners ready, Kyon-kun."

After I acknowledged her with a nod, I left my room and made my way to the kitchen. I was happy to see that for the first time in what felt like forever, the dinner session with the Suzumiyas had returned to normal. Both Oruki and Haruhi were both back to being their usual selves at the table, both eating like the pigs that they were. It was kinda nice that everything seemed to be back to the way they should have been all along. I noticed Oruki glancing at his daughter a few times, perhaps finally coming to terms that perhaps everything was okay. I decided to eat as much as I could, too. I figured I was going to need it.

I knew I was in for a rough week… Oh crap, I still need to do my homework…

And so, the next chapter will contain the mud wrestling contest! Woot!

I know this was another fast update, so I hope you enjoy. Sorry if the last two chapters have been a little short. I promise that the next chapter will be a lot longer.

See ya later!

Chapter 19

Even before I start this, I can already tell that this'll be the hardest chapter I've written yet. I have to write fairly lengthy scenes involving all four matches, and I have to do it in a way that's detailed, entertaining and believable to the reader while making sure the characters act the way they should. With any luck, this'll be a very enjoyable chapter for all of you. If I fail, than I'll commit seppuku in order to retain my honor.

Oh, and I wish to express my absolute joy in the fact that the Endless Eight is finally over! YYYYYAAAAAAAAYYYYYYY!!!!!

As enjoys, hope you enjoy the chapter!

Chapter 19

I remember telling myself earlier this week that if tried to expect the worst that I'd be much more mentally prepared for what came my way this week. I should have told myself that I'm an idiot. Seriously, this week was way worse than I had imagined.

First off, there was the digging. It turned out that creating a ring ten meters across was a much taller order than we originally thought it would be. The sheer amount of dirt that Koizumi and I had to dig up just for it to be enough was insane… INSANE!! Haruhi basically brought us to the grassy hill near Tsuruya-san's house and told us to start digging. Only this time, we were digging for the dirt itself rather than buried treasure. This made the digging feel even more like work than before. Tsuruya-san was nice enough to provide a truck driven by one of her servants that would dump the dirt near some unspecified location near the school. It took us a good five hours of straight digging to gather enough dirt for the job. That wasn't enough, of course, because we also had to remove any grass, roots, rocks, worm, bugs and trash that we could find in the dirt, which was

an impossible task. When we were finally done gathering all the dirt, it took most of Wednesday and Thursday to do.

And that wasn't all. When I got home after doing that, I had chores to do as well, which included cleaning both the garage and the attic. Both places had a ton of stuff that obviously wasn't needed by anyone, so I had to sort through all of it and bring it outside to be thrown away. I also had to sweep and dust both places and do it quickly. This was basically because Oruki ordered that I didn't get to eat until I finished the chores, which had to count as cruel and inhumane. Smelling that delicious cooking while trying to clean out the garage was torture. Damn you, Oruki! If there was any plus side, it was that there was a lot of stuff in there that belonged to Haruhi when she was young, including some old pacifiers, baby bottles, pajamas and even a baby blanket that obviously had been chewed on when it was being used. I'm so going to tease her about that later.

Meanwhile, while I was slaving away, Haruhi, Nagato, Tsuruya-san and Asahina-san were busy undergoing a massive underground marketing campaign to make sure as many people as possible showed up to the contest. Haruhi swiftly had flyers printed up (care of the school's printers) and got herself and Asahina-san dressed up as bunny girls once again. They were sure to stand outside of the school grounds while they handed out flyers to all the students who were leaving the school. There was also a massive word of mouth campaign as well, which was taken care of by Tsuruya-san. She pretty much talked to every person she possibly could, her outgoing personality obviously making it easy for her to get the word out. Nagato used her incredible computer skills to obtain a large number of the students' e-mail addresses and sent every one of them an e-mail advertisement of the contest. Overall, it was an incredibly impressive marketing campaign done all in the time span of two days by a mere four high school girls all while having to worry about the other aspects of the preparation for the mud wresting tournament. If this didn't draw in a lot of people, I don't know what would.

In any case, it was now Friday, the day of the tournament. There wasn't anything left to do except wait for the right time to create the ring and set up all the things we needed. I still wasn't sure if we could pull this off. Even if we managed to bring in a massive crowd of people, how we would pull this off without the school itself interfering was beyond me. Just the thought of cleaning up our mess seemed like a nightmare. To be honest, it seemed highly unlikely that this was going to go off without a hitch. That would be a good thing in my mind, since I really didn't want to battle Koizumi in this contest. Just the thought of it made my skin crawl. Not only that, but Haruhi would have to cancel her plans to go to Kyoto, and we'd all be spared the enormous embarrassment that would likely happen should Haruhi confront that old geezer.

At this point, I was still comfortably asleep in my bed, completely tuned out to the world. I would have happily stayed this way as long as I possibly could, but as always, a certain diabolical girl had decided I didn't deserve to be well rested. I soon felt something pushing onto my forehead. Before I knew it, I felt the muscles in my forehead cramp up and twitch. It was incredibly painful. I instinctively slapped my forehead to rid myself of whatever was hurting me. I felt nothing there. Still mostly within the depths of my subconscious, I simply tried to fall back to sleep. I then felt something push into my neck. Once again, the muscles twitched involuntarily once again. This time it hurt really badly, as the skin around the neck is really sensitive. I was now awake, reaching for whatever was hurting me. I failed to grab it, but I was able to barely touch it. It was metal and tube-like. Unfortunately, there was no way I could tell what it was without looking. Just as I was about to open my eyes and look, I felt it poke my cheek, causing the annoying pain to serge through there, too. Frustrated and annoyed, I finally opened my eyes and sat up.

To my complete lack of surprise, Haruhi was standing next to my bed, her face displaying a twisted expression of pleasure. What did surprise me was the fact that she was holding onto a pen, and she was pointing the side with the button at me.

"I think we have a winner," she said as she prepared to poke me with it again. This time she got my forearm, once again sending the area in my arm into a frenzy of twitching pain. It was at this point that I finally figured out what the hell was up with the pen. It was one of those fake pens used to trick people by electrocuting them when they pushed the button down. Haruhi's use for it definitely wasn't what it was intended for, but it was obviously getting the job done.

"This one doesn't have any of the downsides of the other methods."

It didn't take a lot of thinking to figure out what she was talking about. For the nearly three weeks that I had been living with Haruhi, I was woken up in some incredibly painful or annoying way. Most of time, Haruhi would settle for beating the crap out of me or dragging me out of the bed, but these method were exhausting and required too much effort. To overcome this Haruhi tried some other methods, including a feather, an air horn, a bucket of cold water, and even a habanero pepper. Unfortunately, all these methods had downsides. The feather didn't work at all; the air horn woke her parents up too; the water got everything soaked; and the pepper… well I'll never forget when she burned her eye because her fingers still had pepper juice on them. However, this trick pen had none of the drawbacks of those other methods. It was clearly a weapon far too powerful to be allowed to be kept in the hands of Haruhi. I had to get it away from her!

I immediately tried to grab the pen. Haruhi was quick to react to my attempt and moved out of the way. I fell onto my face thanks to my failure. I pushed myself up and tried again to grab it, but I missed once again.

Haruhi cackled in delight at my growing aggravation. She held out the pen close to my face. "Do you want it, Kyon? Here, take it!"

I once again tried to reach for it, but Haruhi was too quick. I was punished for my pathetic attempt by being poked by the pen right on my forehead once again.

"Ow, cut it out!" To relieve the shocking pain, I pulled my head back and swiped at the pen. The fact that I kept missing it was really starting to get exasperating.

"You're way too slow, Kyon! You're making this easy!"

I finally got up on my feet to give chase. "I'll get that thing from you even if it kills me!"

Haruhi obliged by taking off out of my room and down the stairs, giggling like a young child who was playing a retarded game of keep away. I followed her in hot pursuit, determined to snag the offending object from her once and for all. Unfortunately, Haruhi's speed gave her a definite edge, so I knew I'd have to find a way to corner her.

She eventually ran into the living room, which at first seemed like a bad idea. Unfortunately, she used the coffee table as a barrier between us. If I tried to move left or right, so did she, making it impossible to actually catch her unless I jumped over the table. I tried to do so, but my foot got caught on the edge of it, causing me to trip. I once again fell on my face, causing the rug to scrape me up a bit. Haruhi immediately ran out of the living room, stopping briefly to turn around, pull her lower eyelid down and stick her tongue at me.

You're so going to get it, Haruhi! I swear it!

I got back up and continued my pursuit, following her into the kitchen. To my surprise, however, she had stopped running and was staring at something. It was only when I entered the kitchen that I too figured out what she was staring at. At the table, Naru-san had her head down, completely sound asleep. She even had a noticeable amount of drool coming down her mouth. It took me a second to realize what had happened. I had almost forgotten that Naru-san had a sleepwalking problem, and would occasionally get up in her sleep to walk around. I would never forget the night where she fell asleep next to me… twice.

"Are you going to poke her with your pen, too?" I asked, obviously joking.

Haruhi returned a scowl when I said that. "Idiot! I would never want to hurt my mom!"

And yet you're more than willing to hurt me… the guy you supposedly like. Am I missing something here?

Haruhi walked up to her mother and shook her shoulder. "Mom, wake up."

After snorting a couple of times, Naru-san slowly raised her head and looked around, obviously a bit disoriented. Once she regained her bearings, she yawned deeply and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. "Not again…"

It was at this point that I realized that Haruhi was now completely distracted by her mother. Taking advantage of the opportunity, I slowly snuck up on her. Just as I was in range, I quickly grabbed at the pen. Got it! Without pausing for a second, I bolted out of the kitchen with my prize in hand.

"You bastard! Give it back!" screamed Haruhi as she instantly took off after me.

I knew she was hot on my heels, but I had hoped that I would be able to stay ahead of her long enough to open the pen and remove the battery, rendering the damn thing useless. Unfortunately, I was unable to outrun Haruhi, and she soon grabbed a hold of my shirt and pulled me back. She then jumped onto my back and wrapped her arms around my neck. My legs were not prepared for the extra weight, and I soon fell onto the ground. The impact of my chest colliding with the wood floor forced me to accidentally drop the pen. It bounced about a meter before rolling away from us. Haruhi tried to make a grab for it, but it went just outside of her reach and rolled right into someone's foot. That someone was, to my dismay, none other than Oruki.

"What the hell is wrong with you two?! Is it too much to ask that you two don't cause a racket first thing in the morning?!" He then bent down to pick up the pen. "Please do not tell me that you two were fighting over this!"

"Kyon was trying to steal it from me!" yelled Haruhi, who by the way was still on my back. Get off me, dammit!

Oruki looked over the pen, looking completely baffled. "Why in god's name would he want to steal this thing?"

It was then that Haruhi had a devilish idea. "Click the button to find out."

The moment she said this, I covered my mouth to keep myself from laughing. I looked up at him to watch as he continued to study the pen, trying to figure out why we were fighting over it. I then watched with glee as he raised his thumb to go and push down the button. Do it. Do it. Do it. Do it! Do it! Do it! He did it!

Oruki immediately yelped in pain and dropped the trick pen onto the floor. As soon as we saw that, Haruhi and I began to laugh hysterically. Haruhi then grabbed the pen off the floor and got up off of me, still laughing. After a few more seconds, we finally stopped.

"That was awesome," said Haruhi, still grinning from ear to ear.

To no one's surprise, Oruki did not take being the brunt of a practical joke very well, his eye twitching in obvious rage. "Oh, you think that's funny, huh?" I could see a blood vessel on his forehead begin to bulge while he held out his hand. He had a surprising sadistic grin on his face while he slowly walked towards his daughter. "Give it to me."

Haruhi held the pen close to her body as she turned away from him. "No way! It's mine!"

As Oruki slowly moved closer to her, I saw my chance at some revenge. I got up and snuck behind Haruhi. I then grabbed her

wrists, trying to hold her in place.

"I got her! Grab it!" I yelled as I struggled with Haruhi.

Haruhi looked up at me with a vicious resentment. "You traitorous bastard! Let go of your Brigade Chief this instant if you don't want to suffer consequences so great that even your ancestors and descendants will suffer from it!"

"Nah," I said, finding this opportunity way too much to pass up. I'm sure whatever she had in store for me, it was worth it. It took everything in my power to hold her in place, though. She's incredibly strong for a girl, and I began to wonder how the hell her relatively small frame could contain so much strength.

Oruki soon grabbed Haruhi's hand and ripped the pen right out of her grip. He then pointed it straight at his daughter and slowly moved it towards her.

"No! Don't!" Haruhi yelled as she fought even harder to escape my grip. I gritted my teeth hard as I held onto her for dear life. Haruhi began kicking, trying to keep her father at bay. She even stomped my foot a few times to get me to let go. I had my eyes shut as I struggled with all my might to ignore the pain and keep her from getting away.

I should have listened to Haruhi, though. When Oruki drove the pen forward, it turned out he was aiming for me rather than his daughter. I soon felt the wonderful sensation of electricity coursing through my neck once again. I immediately let go of Haruhi and backed away, rubbing my neck.

"Ow! What the hell?! Why'd you jab me for?!"

Oruki had a good solid laugh at my expense for about a minute before he answered. "Because hurting you is way funnier than hurting my daughter, that's why!"

Haruhi also had a quick laugh. "Serves you right, Kyon! And don't think I'm going to forget what you did, either!" She then turned back to her father and held out her hand. "Can I have it back?"

"Hell no," said Oruki as he held the pen away from her. "This thing's mine now. That's what you get for waking me up and tricking me." He then turned around and began to walk away.

Haruhi then slowly turned around to face me, giving me a horrible death glare. I backed up a few paces, growing increasingly afraid of what she was planning to do to me.

"Uh… heh… you know… I did get electrocuted five times this morning. Maybe that's enough to make things even, don't you think?"

I don't even know why I tried. Moments later, Haruhi took a deep breath before announcing a penalty so harsh, cruel and downright evil that I figured that I would regret having to experience it for the rest of my life.

I'll get to that later, though…

It was about an hour later, and Haruhi and I were now dressed and ready for school. We were just sitting down to eat breakfast when Haruhi herself made the announcement to her parents about our plans today.

"Mom, dad, we're not going to be home until rather late tonight because our club is doing some fundraising after school."

Oruki immediately put his paper down and looked at the both of us suspiciously. "Fundraising? What kind of fundraising?"

I was worried about this question, but Haruhi seemed completely prepared for it. "We're doing a raffle."

"And why do you need to do a fundraiser?"

Up to this point, Haruhi had yet to tell her parents about this insane trip to Kyoto, so I guess now was as good a time as ever to spill the beans.

"Our club is going to Kyoto next week for the entire weekend!" said Haruhi excitedly.

"Ooo, that sounds like a ton of fun!" exclaimed Naru-san excitedly as she began to serve breakfast.

Oruki was considerably less excited. "And you decided to wait until now to tell us about this, why?"

"I had to make sure the whole club was able to come first," she said, an obvious lie.

Oruki stared Haruhi down for a few seconds before he looked at me. "Kyon? I need to talk to you down in the basement for a second. Man to man!"

My eyes widened in obvious nervousness as I cautiously followed him down into the basement. I was expecting him to beat the hell out of me for only waiting until now to tell him about what was actually a pretty big trip. When the two of us made it to the bottom of the basement, he immediately grabbed me by my shoulders. He had the look of desperation as he shook me back and forth.

"What the hell am I supposed to do?!"

"What do you mean?" I asked, a bit confused.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about! This damn trip! What the hell is it all about?!"

I sort of told him the truth. "She wanted to bring the club to a convention to meet this guy called James Randi."

"Why?" asked Oruki, obviously determined to get to the bottom of what we were up to.

This time I had to lie. "She's kind of a really big fan of his. She really wanted to meet him."

Oruki let go of my shoulders and began to rub his temples. "Damn that girl… Telling us only a week in advance before going on a trip like this. She couldn't have told us about this sooner? And knowing what I know now, what else can I say except 'Sure Haruhi-chan, do whatever you want!' She can practically get away with murder! It's ridiculous!"

"What would you have said if you didn't know what you know?"

"I would have said no!" answered Oruki.

Well that's no good. On the other hand, I just realized that I had a huge advantage over Oruki. As long as he knew the truth about his daughter's powers, I could totally use that against him. I decided to make a mental note of this, knowing that he wouldn't dare actually do anything to me for fear that doing so would upset his daughter. "Uh… yeah, it doesn't look like you have much choice in the matter. You know what would happen if Haruhi got upset."

Oruki rubbed his face before giving me a sharp look. "I swear to god that if anything happens on this trip, I'm putting the blame squarely on you! Do you hear me?!"

"Loud and clear," I said as I made my way to the stairs. Just as I got to the bottom of them, Oruki stopped me with on last question.

"By the way, what's the prize for the raffle?"

I stopped in my track, completely caught off guard. If Haruhi were next to me, she probably could have answered him, but once again, Oruki singled me out to try and see if we were lying. I felt a drop of cold sweat roll down my forehead as I turned back to him and tried to come up with a sufficient lie.

"Uh… prize? Yeah… uh…"

Fortunately, the door to the basement opened up, revealing Naru-san. "Are you guys done talking? You're breakfast is getting cold!"

I even heard Haruhi yelling down to us as well. "Hurry up, Kyon! Or we'll be late for school!"

I turned back to Oruki and smiled. "I better eat up and get going." I then ran up the stairs and into the kitchen, successfully avoiding the question.

I knew he was very suspicious, but there was no way we could tell him that we were making money on a mud wrestling tournament. He'd probably have a stroke while he strangled the life out of me.

Actually, seeing Oruki having a stroke wouldn't be so bad. He deserved to have at least that happen to him. I liked him way more when he was depressed and aloof.

As much as I would have liked for school to fly by today, it didn't. Every lecture that came today was like an exercise in torture, mostly because I continued to anxiously await the events that would transpire after school. Truth be told, I had mixed feelings about the whole event. Sure, there was going to be a massive amount of eye candy, which was always nice, but I had to also wrestle Koizumi. This would have been okay, except… Haruhi made some changes thanks to what I did earlier this morning. What changes, you ask? I can't tell you. It's too embarrassing. You'll find out soon enough anyway.

The whole Brigade plus Tsuruya-san was now in the clubroom. Haruhi laid out the coordinated plans that would be put into action in less than an hour. Koizumi and I were to take a wheelbarrow and use it to transport all the dirt to a spot Haruhi designated earlier. At the same time, Asahina-san and Tsuruya-san would wet the dirt down with a hose to turn it into mud. Finally, Nagato and Haruhi would grab all the other items we'd need. We apparently had only an hour to do this task. This was because the time Haruhi set for the

event to start was exactly one hour after the time that all the clubs were scheduled to end. She figured that most of the school officials would have gone home by then. I knew better, of course, so I asked Nagato to see to it that she used her powers to make sure that none of the school officials would be able to notice what was happening. Don't ask me how she was going to do it, but she told me she could, so that's all that matters.

The items that were going to be brought along that were needed for the event included the following: One stopwatch, one megaphone, one whistle, two tables, four chairs, one cooler filled with ice, several cases of soft drinks, a stack of tickets that were printed up by Haruhi, a box to store the money in, a few score cards for the judges to use to determine who they thought won a round, and finally a bag filled with… the stuff Haruhi was going to use for my penalty. I cringed at the very thought of it.

Haruhi turned on the computer one last time before we were to go out. She went a found a couple videos of both women and men who were mud wrestling.

"These videos should give all of you a good idea of what is to be expected of you when you have your match," said Haruhi. "So I'm showing them to you now so it's fresh in your minds when it's show time!"

The women in all of the videos had adopted rather… suggestive poses while they were busy wrestling each other. There was little doubt in anyone's mind that this was not really about the wrestling as much as it was the about objectification of women as sexual objects. This was okay with me, of course, as it gave me something nice to look at. The men in the videos were much more aggressive. There was actually a genuine effort by the guys to beat the crap out of each other. I tried to picture myself beating the crap out of Koizumi. That bastard had to go down. Tsuruya-san laughed at all videos we watched, obviously amused in the fact that we were expected to try and imitate what we were seeing. However, there was one person among us who wasn't comfortable about all this.

"D… do we really have to do that?" asked Asahina-san, her pale face growing increasingly red as she watched the videos.

Haruhi stood up and wrapped her arms around Asahina-san. "Of course, Mikuru-chan! That's the point of mud wrestling! We have to show off our sexiness to the crowd!"

"But it's too embarrassing!"

Haruhi squeezed Asahina-san hard. "You're so cute when you're embarrassed, Mikuru-chan! Just remember that a lot of your fans are going to be out there rooting for you! Don't disappoint them, okay?"

Asahina-san became even more unsure after hearing those words, so I decided to try my best to calm her down. "Don't worry, Asahina-san. We're all going to be out there humiliating ourselves, so you won't be alone."

"That's right," continued Haruhi. "All of us are making a sacrifice for the good of the Brigade. It'll all be worth it when we're up in Kyoto! Keep your eye on the prize!"

I looked at my watch. It was about fifteen minutes before we would have to start setting up. I looked outside one last time. This was going to be one hell of an afternoon.

It was time. We all had to work fast. As planned, Koizumi and I ran to collect the dirt we stockpiled, while Tsuruya-san and Asahina-san began to move the dirt around in a circle and wetting it down and turning it into mud. In the meantime, Haruhi and Nagato quickly brought out the tables, chairs and anything else we would need.

While we were working, I noticed Nagato briefly putting her hand up and chanting something briefly. I didn't notice anything different around us, but I could only assume that we were now safe from the watchful eyes of school administrators.

Moving an enormous amount of dirt was definitely less than fun, and since our time was so limited, we had to hustle our asses off to move it all. The spot that Haruhi picked out was in front of some bleachers that would undoubtedly be where the audience would sit. Luckily for me, Taniguchi and Kunikida arrived about half an hour early, so Haruhi made the both of them help me and Koizumi. Thanks to their extra help, everything worked out perfectly, and we were able to finish preparations a few minutes in advance so we would be able to get dressed into our swimwear just before the event would start. To my dismay, Haruhi insisted that Koizumi and I wore Speedos, and since I didn't have my own, I had to borrow one of Koizumi's. I reluctantly put them on, trying desperately not to think about where these came from. I also decided to keep my t-shirt on until it was time for me to face Koizumi. Walking around wearing only a Speedo would be way too embarrassing.

A cluster of people had already formed by the time I had gotten ready. Koizumi had taken a seat at the table off to the side, while Haruhi directed everyone to form a line in front of it. Taniguchi and Kunikida were already sitting at the "Judges Panel" which was nothing more than the table set to the side near the mud pit. I even noticed that Sakanaka-san had showed up and was making her way to the table she was designated to sit at. I decided to walk up to the judge's table to greet Sakanaka-san and chat it up with Taniguchi and Kunikida until the matches started.

When I came close to the table, I saw Taniguchi waving at me like an idiot. "Yo, Kyon! Are you ready or what?!"

I waited until I was up to the table to respond. "I don't think it's possible to be ready for something as crazy as this."

Taniguchi held his fist in front of him in pure, elated joy. "This is easily going to be the highlight of my entire life! It was totally worth having to help you guys out to do this!"

If you think that this'll be the highlight of you life, you must be setting your expectations on life pretty low.

"Seeing four hot girls wrestling in mud will definitely be a lot of fun to watch," said Kunikida. "I kinda wish I had a camcorder to record it."

"Don't worry," said Taniguchi. "I'm sure someone in the crowd will be recording all this. I'm definitely buying a copy if they sell it!"

Even though Haruhi specifically announced in both the flyers and e-mails that cameras and camcorders were not allowed, I couldn't help but agree that someone would probably manage to sneak one in. Her reasoning was that she didn't want there to be any evidence of what we were up to, and thus, preventing us from getting in trouble with the school.

I turned to Sakanaka-san and smiled. "Thanks for helping out. It's a bit embarrassing to be honest."

She smiled back politely, looking a bit embarrassed herself. "It's okay. I was happy to help out after what you guys did for JJ."

JJ, whose real name was Rousseau, was the little puppy that got infected with a data lifeform a couple months back. Thanks to Nagato, the little guy recovered quickly and was doing much better.

"How is he, by the way?" I asked.

"He's grown a bit, but he's still pretty small," answered Sakanaka-san happily. "He's still a handful, but I wouldn't have him any other way."

"That's good," I said as my eyes diverted towards the ever growing line of people. To my lack of surprise, the marketing campaign set out by the Brigade was a huge success. It made me wonder if the people living around here had any lives outside of school. How bored must they all be to spend 1500 (or even 2000) yen on this crap? I of course have no right to complain since I'm actually one of the people actively participating in this.

It was then that I noticed that there were a couple people marching up that didn't bother to get in line, one man and one woman. At first I was worried that they might have been school officials, but as they came closer I realized who they really were. I thought my heart actually leapt into my throat. No! Please tell me that it isn't them!

I bolted immediately towards them. In hindsight, I probably should have been running away, but I didn't really think my actions through. I was hoping I could explain away what was happening, but I was doomed to failure the moment they got here.

Oh, and in case you haven't figure it out, the two people I was referring to are Haruhi's parents. Yay…

I stopped when I was about ten meters away from them and held out my hands. "Okay, I know this looks bad, but let me explain!"

Oruki didn't even respond as he continued to march up to me like some brutish Ogre. I back away a bit as he came closer, but eventually he came close enough to grab me by my shirt collar and pull me close to him. Anger was an obvious understatement for his mood right now. "I knew it! I knew the both of you were lying to me! Raffle my ass! What the hell is going on here?!"

Okay, this was bad. Really, really bad. Oruki could easily ruin the whole night if I didn't think of something. Anything! I realized that perhaps telling the truth was a good idea. "It's a… mud wrestling contest." I said the last part weakly, almost expecting his fist to crash right into my cranium the moment I finished saying it.

Fortunately, Oruki decided to use a tiny bit of restraint for the moment and didn't beat me to a pulp. I'm guessing it's because we were out in public. Naru-san, being the type of person that she is, became immediately excited the moment she heard me say this.

"Ooo, this sounds like a whole bunch of fun!"

Oruki ignored his wife's comment and continued to threaten me. "You have two seconds to give me five good reasons not to have me shove my foot up your ass!"

"I'll give you one. Haruhi." That was all I needed to say. I had already figured out that using her as a bargaining chip against him was a surefire way to gain his cooperation. After all, even Oruki wasn't evil enough to want to accidentally destroy the universe because he upset his daughter.

Oruki's disposition froze the moment I mentioned her name. I could tell that he realized that he was powerless to do anything without upsetting his daughter enough to create a closed space. After a few moments, his anger reemerged, but this time it was combined with an obvious frustration over his inability to do anything. Even though on the outside I still looked pretty scared, in the back of my mind I was feeling pretty smug. I wondered how else I could use Haruhi against him. It was kinda fun seeing him squirm.

Naru-san grabbed onto Oruki's arm to get his attention. "Let's go get some tickets and watch!"

Oruki slowly turned his head to face his wife. "Are you out of your mind?!"

Naru-san began to pout when he asked that. "Aw, don't be so mean! We never go out and do anything fun! Besides, we'll be supporting their trip to Kyoto!"

Oruki motions his hand around the whole field. "You see this?! Do you see what Haruhi has done?! Our daughter is quickly becoming a delinquent, and you're okay with that?!"

"You're overreacting!" said Naru-san as she cutely tugged at his arm. "Don't be such a meanie! Let buy some tickets, please? Please? Please? Please? Please? Please? Please? Please? Please? Please? Please? Please?" She continued to say "Please?" repeatedly, trying desperately to get him to agree.

Oruki let go of me and put his hand to his face. I could tell that he was beginning to crack under Naru-san influence. Even though he was usually the dominate one in the relationship, I noticed that whenever his wife wanted something really, really badly, he had a hard time saying no. I was quickly reminded of the first day that I met the two of them when Naru-san's pleading was basically the reason I currently had a place to live.

As expected, Oruki eventually gave in. "Fine already! Just stop!" After Naru-san leapt up in joy and began to drag him towards the back of the line, he pointed a finger directly at me and began to yell. "I swear, Kyon-kun, that when this is over you're going to pay! I'm going to make you clean every inch of the house with a tooth brush! I'll make you wash the wax the car, too! And you'll put new shingles on the roof! And you'll have two hours to do all of it! No, one hour! And then you're…" By then he was too far away for me to hear him. I secretly hoped that he wasn't serious, but I knew better. I can't wait to get back already…

I turned towards the front of the line. Koizumi was still taking money from eager customers, but he gave knowing glances at me a few times. He obviously saw what just happened. I noticed that Haruhi was busy directing people to the proper seats, making sure no one that didn't pay the full price was sitting in the front. She apparently hadn't noticed that her parents had arrived. Good.

I approached Koizumi to ask him a favor. "Whatever you do, don't tell Haruhi her parents are here."

Koizumi gave me an annoying smile. "I take it they're staying to watch the show?"

"Look, I'm sure if Haruhi found out that her parents were here, she'd probably freak out."

"I understand," said Koizumi. "But how're you going to make it so she doesn't see them while they're seated."

"I'll take care of that," I said as I began to walk towards Haruhi.

As I got closer to Haruhi, she turned to me and scowled. "About time! What took you so long?!"

Apparently, Haruhi didn't notice that I'd been dressed for a while, so I took advantage of the situation and lied. "I… uh… was using the bathroom."

Haruhi began to point at the crowd. "Hurry up and take over for me! Make sure that only people who buy the marked tickets are allowed to sit in the front!"

Haruhi then walked away, leaving me with the job of directing people to their seats. I was relieved that distracting her was so easy. After a few minutes of checking people's tickets, I noticed Oruki and Naru-san walking up the steps in order to take their seats. Oruki gave me a nasty glare when he saw me, while Naru-san simply gave a friendly wave. There were enough people in the crowd now that they blended into it, making it unlikely that Haruhi would spot them accidentally. The funny thing was that they were probably the only people here that weren't students from our school. I figured that this must've made Oruki feel incredibly awkward. Good. I want him to suffer. Even if it backfires onto me, seeing that man uncomfortable makes me feel a little better inside.

Soon afterwards, all the people that had arrived were seated, and the show was about to begin…

Okay, so now that the event has officially started, I guess it's only proper that I describe what everyone was wearing. Haruhi was wearing her two piece bikini that had multi-colored hearts on it. Asahina-san and Nagato were both wearing one-piece suits, pink with red polka-dots and plain white respectively. Tsuruya-san had a bikini with black and yellow horizontal stripes. Koizumi and I had black and blue Speedos, respectively.

It should also be noted that Asahina-san had her hair tied into two, adorable ponytails, while Tsuruya-san had her hair in a large bun. I assumed that she did that so that no one would try and pull on her ridiculously long hair. Not only that, but getting it all muddy would probably make it really hard to clean, too. Haruhi also decided to remove her hair band for the competition, likely to prevent the mud from ruining it. It's relatively rare that I see Haruhi without it on, even in the mornings, as she usually has it on before she wakes me up. I was conflicted with her not wearing it. She looked cute as hell without it, but she'd worn it for so long that it felt weird when she's not wearing it.

Haruhi went and grabbed the megaphone and prepared to address the crowd. "Welcome to the First Annual SOS Brigade Stupendous Spring-time Mud Wrestling Tournament!"

It better be the last annual, too, or I'll have to shoot myself.

"We want to thank you all for coming here on such short notice! We didn't have a lot of time to put this together, but it still looks like the turn-outs been incredible! We all hope you enjoy yourselves out there! Now let me introduce everyone that's competing!"

She then goes and introduces every one of us, including herself. The cheers were huge when Asahina-san was introduced and pretty large for Tsuruya-san as well. Nagato had a small but very vocal group of guys cheer for her. Koizumi had a loud group of girls cheering for him when he was introduced, which came with little surprise. How could a guy so popular with the girls stay single, anyway? To my dismay, I was introduced by my stupid nickname again. I swear that more people knew my nickname than they knew my real one. Not only that, but I probably got the fewest amount of cheers, too. Dammit, why am I the unpopular one? Hell, even Haruhi got more cheers than I did. Way more, in fact. This perplexed me a bit, as I was certain that no one in their right mind would want Haruhi given her reputation. Maybe those who cheered were half-insane, too. Or more likely, they were just a bunch of first year students who weren't aware of Haruhi's reputation yet. Yeah… that had to be it.

Nevertheless, I couldn't help but feel surprisingly pissed at all the people cheering for her. I couldn't understand why, though.

Haruhi also explained the rules of the tournament and then introduced the judges. When introducing Taniguchi and Kunikida, Haruhi displayed zero enthusiasm. Despite this, both of them were happy to clap and put their fists in the air in excitement. Sakanaka-san merely waved shyly to the crowd, obviously not used to the attention. After that, Haruhi went and announced that first match up of the afternoon.

"For our first match, we have Mikuru Asahina vs. Yuki Nagato!"

After hearing all the clapping and cheering (Taniguchi was probably cheering louder than anyone, standing up and swinging his arm around like an idiot), Nagato and Asahina-san took their places on the opposite sides of the ring. I got as close to Nagato as I could to ask her a favor.

"Uh… Nagato. Try to go easy on her, okay?"

Nagato simply looked directly at me and gave a subtle nod. Confident that she wasn't going to accidentally murder Asahina-san, I walked back to the side opposite of the side the crowd was on. When the both of them were ready, Haruhi got the stopwatch and whistle ready.

"Ready! Set! GO!" yelled Haruhi as she blew on the whistle.

Nagato simply stood there, not moving a muscle, and Asahina-san was also reluctant to do anything. Instead, she just shivered and whimpered in fear. She took a few steps towards Nagato, but her unwillingness increased with every step his took. Eventually, she made it to the middle of the pit before she stopped, too fearful to go any further.

It was a really slow and boring start to the contest, and I could tell that Haruhi and the crowd were growing impatient.

"Come on, Mikuru-chan! Do something! Go over there and kick her butt!"

Even though I knew Asahina-san had zero chance of victory, I decided to throw a few words of encouragement as well. "You can do it, Asahina-san! Just do your best!"

"Go for it, Mikuru-chan!" yelled Tsuruya-san with her fist in the air.

After looking at us, Asahina-san swallowed hard and looked back at Nagato. She then put on her most determined face, put her arms out in front of her and charged forward. She closed her eyes and turned her head away, making it obvious that this was a pretty pathetic first attack. Since she wasn't actually looking at her opponent, it was obviously doomed to failure.

Nagato merely stepped aside and put her foot out. This caused Asahina-san to trip over it and land face first into the mud near the edge of the ring. I could only watch in pity as Asahina-san slowly lifted herself up, pouting in embarrassment. Tsuruya-san laughed hysterically at her failure, along with several people in the crowd.

"Get up, Mikuru-chan!" yelled Haruhi. "Don't let her embarrass you like that!"

Asahina-san tried to wipe some of the mud off her face with her arm before getting up. She was standing next to Nagato this time, making her appear very uncomfortable. She slowly circled around her, as if trying to look for some kind of opening. Nagato never moved, instead just standing there like some kind of statue. Eventually, Asahina-san reached out and grabbed Nagato by the arm and began to pull. She obviously pulled with all her might, but Nagato didn't so much as budge.

"Why… won't… you… move!" cried Asahina-san as she repeatedly tried to tug and pull Nagato but to no avail. It was as if Nagato was bolted to the ground somehow. I knew that Asahina-san was pretty

weak compared to the other girls, but Nagato was really making her look feeble.

"Come on, Nagato!" I yelled. "I know I asked you not to go all out on her, but you could at least do something!"

Nagato looked at me directly for a few seconds before staring straight ahead again. She then began to tilt and fall back in the direction Asahina-san was pulling her. Asahina-san was obviously not ready for this, and soon Nagato landed directly on top of her, causing her to fall onto her back as well.

I facepalmed when I saw this, as it looked rather ridiculous. I was hoping that the match-up between these two wouldn't be so absurd, but I was wrong. Nagato now lay on top of Asahina-san, who was now flailing around helplessly trying to get Nagato off.

"Come on, Yuki! Don't just lay there! Do something!" yelled Haruhi. "You watched the videos earlier! Just do what they did!"

Nagato stared at Haruhi for a few seconds before she got up and straddled Asahina-san. She then placed her hands directly onto Asahina-san's chest, squeezing firmly.

It took a second for Asahina-san to register what Nagato was doing, but when she did she immediately screamed. She flailed about even harder in a desperate struggle to get Nagato off of her.

"Let go! Let go! That hurts! This is embarrassing!"

I now had both of my hands covering my face while shaking my head. Asahina-san's humiliation was so great that even I could feel it. Haruhi and Tsuruya-san laughed upon seeing what Nagato was doing. Taniguchi and Kunikida hooted and hollered while Sakanaka-san covered her mouth in shock. Finally, I looked into the crowd, trying to spot Oruki and Naru-san. When I spotted them, I saw that Oruki had also facepalmed, and Naru-san appeared to be giggling.

Oruki is so going to kill me when this is over. I wasn't even sure if the threat of universal destruction would prevent my untimely demise.

Eventually, Nagato released Asahina-san's breasts and grabbed her ankle instead. She then began dragging Asahina-san around the ring. Asahina-san tried frantically to escape Nagato's clutches while screaming away, but it was a futile attempt. No doubt that Nagato's grip was perfect. This continued for about another minute before she finally let go and stood there, looking down at Asahina-san.

Poor Asahina-san. She looked completely miserable and exhausted. She was on the verge of tears as she spoke. "I… I… I don't wanna do this anymore!"

"You can't give up, Mikuru-chan!" yelled Haruhi like she was some kind of coach. "Get back into the battle and give it your all. Attack now while she's not expecting it."

I'm pretty sure Nagato was ready for anything she could throw at her, especially since she could hear everything Haruhi was saying.

Asahina-san tried to wipe her face again, but it was pointless to do so as her whole body was now completely covered in mud. She looked up at Nagato, who was still standing there motionlessly. She eyed her opponent's body from head to toe, hoping to find some sort of weakness. Eventually, she seemed to settle for the legs and latched onto them.

"That a girl, Mikuru-chan!" screamed Haruhi. "Take out her legs and make her fall on her face!"

Asahina-san once again began to tug away at Nagato's legs, using all the strength she still had left in her body. She tried to pull from various directions, but it was as useless as her attempt to pull on her arm. I wasn't sure if Nagato was using her powers to keep herself anchored to the ground or what. Even if she wasn't I somehow doubted that the outcome of this match would be any different.

Eventually, Asahina-san gave up pulling, looking too tired out to try anymore. "No fair! She won't move!"

Nagato took this opportunity to counter by grabbing Asahina-san by her arm and the back of her swimsuit. She then lifted Asahina-san up to her shoulders effortlessly. Asahina-san screamed and thrashed about more than ever, obviously incredibly uncomfortable with being up in the air. At first, it looked like Nagato was going to throw Asahina-san, which I knew could be dangerous even if she was going to land on mud.

"Careful, Nagato!" I yelled, showing my concern.

Nagato turned her head towards me and stared for a few seconds. She then turned her head forward again and bent down, gently dropping Asahina-san onto her butt.

From this point onward, the remainder of the match consisted of Nagato dragging Asahina-san like a rag-doll, while Asahina-san helplessly flopped about desperately. Given Asahina-san's lack of athletic talent, and Nagato… well… being Nagato, the match ended up being every bit as bizarre and one-sided as I expected. I looked at the crowd for their reaction. While some of them were cheering, it was clear that they as a whole were a little disappointed with the outcome of the match.

Finally, Haruhi blew the whistle, officially ending the match. I was thankful that it ended when it did. My heart went out to Asahina-san. She had become a worn-out, dejected mess by the end of it. I immediately ran into the ring where Asahina-san lay and attempted to pick her up.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Thank you, Kyon-kun," she responded as cheerfully as she could. She nervously looked at Haruhi, perhaps worried that she might get the wrong idea about what I was doing.

Haruhi looked at the both of us with obvious annoyance. "Hurry it up already! She's fine! She's been through worse!"

I ignored Haruhi's statement and help Asahina-san off the ring. Haruhi then went up to the judges to find out how they scored the match. After viewing the results, she then grabbed the megaphone and ran between where Nagato and Asahina-san were standing.

"The results of the match are in! And the winner by unanimous decision is… Yuki Nagato!"

Without a doubt. Seriously, you'd have to be blind to think that the results would be any different. The match went pretty much exactly how I expected it to, and I was glad it was over. It was rather embarrassing if you ask me.

The crowd reacted predictably. Since the vast majority of them were fans of Asahina-san, the wave of booing that came was painfully obvious. There were a few cheers mixed in, clearly from those who were fans of Nagato, but it overall it wasn't a popular ruling. I wondered if Taniguchi and Kunikida were going to get the crap kicked out of them after this event was over. Not that I'd really care if they did.

After that, Haruhi went and grabbed the hose nearby and gave both Nagato and Asahina-san a good hosing. Asahina-san screamed loudly and tried to cover herself while Nagato simply stood there and let the water wash her down. Pretty soon the mud was washed off the both of them, allowing them to be relatively clean.

Once that was done, the second match was now ready to start. This time Koizumi was given the honors of announcing the next match. He waited until Haruhi and Tsuruya-san were in their respective sides of the ring before he took the megaphone and made the announcement.

"For our second match, ladies and gentlemen, we have an awesome treat for you!" said Koizumi overdramatically, his arm movements

way over-exaggerated. "For round two, we have the lovely Tsuruya-san versus…" He paused briefly for more dramatic effect. "… the incredibly, wonderful and beautiful leader of the SOS Brigade herself, Haruhi Suzumiya!"

You're such a kiss-ass, Koizumi. You know that? Be sure to clean off your nose when you're done.

After both girls were done waving to the crowd, they both turned to each other to get ready for their match. Without a doubt, this match would prove to be a very different beast than the last one. Haruhi was definitely the favorite to win, but I knew that Tsuruya-san was formidable herself. I would expect her to at least hold her own again Haruhi, which would give a much more exciting match than the last one.

Just as Koizumi was preparing to set the stopwatch, I could see that Haruhi was out for blood. Even after all her speeches about how these matches weren't meant to be serious, I knew that whenever it was her turn to wrestle that she would go all out. I just hoped that she didn't go too far and hurt anyone.

As soon as the whistle blew, Haruhi bolted directly as Tsuruya-san at full speed, obviously intent on tackling the green-haired sempai with full force. Unfortunately for her, she apparently underestimated the slipperiness of the mud she was running on. After only a couple steps, she slipped and fell directly on her face, causing her to slide all the way to Tsuruya-san's feet.

A second later, Tsuruya-san was laughing hysterically at Haruhi's clumsiness and so was a decent portion of the crowd.

"Oh my god! That was way too funny!" said Tsuruya-san as she continued to laugh away.

Haruhi lifted herself off the muddy ground, looking less than amused. Gritting her teeth, she immediately lunged for Tsuruya-san. Tsuruya-san saw this coming just in time, and evaded her grasp. She circled

around Haruhi and tried to put some distance between herself and the Brigade leader. Haruhi picked herself up off the ground and glared at Tsuruya-san intensely.

"You think that was funny, huh? I'll show you!"

She then bolted directly at Tsuruya-san again. This turned out to be a mistake once again, as Tsuruya-san countered by grabbing Haruhi by her arms, rolling back and kicking her leg out. The result of this was that Haruhi forward momentum caused her to fly forward a good couple meters before crashing into the mud again. Even I couldn't contain myself from laughing this time, secretly believing that this was an act of Karma working against her.

Tsuruya-san was quickly to laugh again at the Brigade Chief. "You're making this megas easy, Haruhi-nyan!"

It was easy to see that Haruhi's embarrassment and frustration were extremely high. She evidently underestimated her opponent, who was playing defensively rather than going up against her toe to toe. She punched the muddy ground before getting back up. She turned towards Tsuruya-san again, but this time she seemed to have given up on the charge and tackle technique. She was now a lot more cautious in her approach, moving slowly and deliberately towards her quarry.

Tsuruya-san also began to guardedly move in towards Haruhi, that cute fang of hers displaying visibly with her expression of delight. It was clear that Tsuruya-san was having a blast toying around with Haruhi. They began to circle around each other, looking for an opening. Haruhi was the first to try and make a move, reaching out to try and grab her opponent. Tsuruya-san dodged her attempt to grab her just in time.

"Coward! Stop avoiding me!" yelled Haruhi, no longer able to hide her growing anger. "I swear when I get my hands on you, I'll unleash suffering so great that even the gods will tremble in fear!"

Tsuruya-san giggled playfully as she continued her game plan since it was working so obviously well. She stuck her tongue out at Haruhi to mock her some more, provoking Haruhi to try and grab her again. This time, Haruhi slipped a little bit. Not enough to make her fall, but enough for Tsuruya-san to take advantage of the moment.

Tsuruya-san's counter took me by total surprise. She got behind Haruhi, put her arms under Haruhi's arms and… grabbed her breasts…

Haruhi's eyes bugged out immediately from the unexpected and unwelcomed contact. Her face became a noticeable shade redder as well. I could see the crowd react positively to Tsuruya-san's actions, as this was clearly what a lot of them came to see. When I looked to where Oruki and Naru-san were, I could see that he now had both hands covering his face in humiliation, while Naru-san was laughing.

Tsuruya-san leaned into Haruhi's ear and spoke coyly. "You know, even if they're not as big as Mikuru-chan's, your rack is still awesome, nyoro~."

Even though I knew I shouldn't, I could help but really enjoy seeing what Tsuruya-san was doing. I think it partially had to do with the fact that Haruhi was finally getting a taste of her own medicine. It not so much fun when your breasts are grabbed without permission, is it Haruhi?

Haruhi's embarrassment was short lived as her expression quickly turned to rage. Just as she tried to grab Tsuruya-san's hands, Tsuruya-san quickly let go and bolted away. Haruhi gave chase, trying desperately to get revenge on the green-haired girl, but her inability to effectively run in the slippery mud made this very difficult. No matter how hard she tried, Tsuruya-san was just a few steps ahead of her. This only made Haruhi even more frustrated.

I went and looked at Koizumi and noticed that he had a look of great concern on his face. Asahina-san did, too. It was then that I realized that this situation was actually potentially disastrous. The more upset

Haruhi got, the more likely a closed space would be formed. At the rate the match was going on at, Haruhi would eventually reach the breaking point. I had to say something to calm her down.

"Calm down, Haruhi!" I yelled. "You're losing right now because you're not using your head! She's clearly trying to get you off your game!"

Haruhi stopped running and looked directly at me. Her face was expressionless for a few moments while she caught her breath. Eventually, her appearance changed to annoyance as she turned away from me.

"Shut up, Kyon! I don't need your stupid advice!" Haruhi then look another deep breath. Despite what she said, I did notice that she appeared to have calmed down a bit.

Tsuruya-san appeared intent on trying to annoy and frustrate Haruhi once again. "Come on, Haruhi-nyan! Don't tells me you give up! That'd be like totally boring!" She even pulled her mouth apart and stuck out her tongue.

Appearing to forget all about what I had said before, Haruhi bolted right at Tsuruya-san head on once again. And like a Spanish bull fighter, Tsuruya-san avoided her charge once more. Haruhi then immediately fell onto her side once more. I would have said that she slipped again, but it didn't look like she did. It almost looked like she fell… on purpose.

"Ow!" screamed Haruhi as she got up and held into her shoulder. She winced when she began to rub it.

Out of concern, Tsuruya-san ran up to Haruhi to see if she was alright. "Oh my gosh! Are you, like, alright and stuff?!" She took a closer look at Haruhi's shoulder to see if it was seriously injured.

It was then that Haruhi went and grabbed Tsuruya-san by her wrist. Her face grew a devilish grin of pure satisfaction. "Got you!"

Tsuruya-san's appearance changed immediately into a nervous smile the moment she realized what was happening. "Uh oh…"

Before she could say anything else, Haruhi unleashed the full extent of her strength and literally flipped her green haired opponent right over her shoulder. Her body slammed right onto her back, causing a bunch of mud to splatter around her. Some of it landed on my face, causing me to flinch. As I took a second to wipe the mud off my face, I had to admit to myself that the move Haruhi did was rather crafty. I suspected as much when I saw her fall. It looked like it was faked. I could only guess that Tsuruya-san didn't get a good look at her fall and thought she hurt herself for real. Either way, it seems that Haruhi's had the upper hand now.

Haruhi quickly got on top of Tsuruya-san and straddled her. I could se her anger start to rise up, making her grin look really, really scary. "You've got a lot of nerve touching my chest! I show you the price you'll have to pay when you violate the Brigade Chief in such a manner!" She then began to fondle her victim's breast in an obvious attempt at revenge.

Tsuruya-san, to my surprise, squealed in delight as she tried desperately to fight off Haruhi's attempts to molest her. As hard as she could she continued to fend off the Brigade Chief's unwanted advances. It should be noted that the crowd was absolutely loving all of this as well as two of the three judges (you have three guesses as to who and the first two don't count). I looked back up to where Oruki and Naru-san were sitting to find that Oruki was probably the only person in the stands not cheering. Even his wife was now into the action, bouncing up and down excitedly. Sometimes I wondered if Naru-san remembers that she's supposed to be Haruhi's mother…

Seeing as her defense against Haruhi's perverted groping hands had been ineffective, Tsuruya-san tried a different tactic. She grabbed a handful of mud and then squished it into Haruhi's face. She continued to twist it into her face, pushing as hard as she could.

"Eat it! Eat it! How's it?! Is it yummy?!"

Haruhi smacked her hand away and began to spit and cough. She rubbed off the excess mud off her face and stuck out her tongue in a grimace, a clear indication that the mud was not "yummy." She then looked evilly at Tsuruya-san and picked up her own handful of mud to mash into her face.

"Here! Have some yourself and find out!" She then pushed the mud right into her opponent, making sure to cover every bit of her face. Tsuruya-san tried to turn her face away, but it didn't do any good. By the time Haruhi pulled her hand away, her face had a large amount of mud as well. She spit the mud out as best she could and grimaced as well. I'll have to make a note to myself not to taste the mud.

Satisfied with what she'd done, Haruhi got off of Tsuruya-san. She was careful to still hold onto her opponent as she helped her up as well. She didn't do this to be nice, however, for as soon as Tsuruya-san was on her feet, Haruhi went and put her arm in between her legs and attempted to pick her up. In a startling display of her impressive power, she actually managed to lift the green haired girl off the ground before she slammed her back down. Tsuruya-san squealed and screamed in excitement as this all happened, obviously having fun even though she was getting her butt kicked now.

For the next couple minutes, Haruhi was in complete control of the match, tossing Tsuruya-san around like a helpless rag-doll. Tsuruya-san tried multiple times to get away, but Haruhi was careful to ensure that she was always within arms reach. She even went and gave Tsuruya-san a German suplex. I was worried that the move might hurt her, but she was fine. It did cause her hair bun to come loose, causing all of her long hair to spill out and become muddy.

Haruhi was about to pick her back up again, no doubt to continue her dominance over her, but she was caught off guard when Tsuruya-san decided to counter. Out of nowhere, she did a sweep kick, which thanks to the slippery mud made it easy to kick Haruhi's legs out from under her. Haruhi fell right onto her stomach, barely able to

catch herself as she fell. Before she could get up, however, Tsuruya-san climbed up onto her and put her into a headlock.

"I gots you now, Haruhi-nyan! Now you're all mines!"

The headlock she had was very tight, and I could see that Haruhi was choking a bit. She began to struggle, lifting herself off the ground to do so. Eventually, she got herself onto her feet, but Tsuruya-san was still holding onto her for dear life, desperate to defeat her opponent.

Haruhi went and grabbed onto Tsuruya-san's arms. She pulled with all her might in an attempt to escape that headlock. To my utter amazement, I could see her slowly muscle her way out of it. As she pulled, Tsuruya-san's grip slowly loosened, until I could see it starting to break. The shock and amazement I felt could soon be seen on Tsuruya-san's face as well, completely at a loss for how Haruhi was doing this. Pretty soon, the gap between her neck and Tsuruya-san's arms was large enough that Haruhi could slip her head through. Once she did, she quickly turned around and grabbed Tsuruya-san by her waist and picked her up. She then slammed her down onto the mud again.

Now standing over her, Haruhi looked down at Tsuruya-san with complete and total confidence. "You'll have to do a lot better than that if you want to beat me!"

Tsuruya-san could only laugh as she looked up at Haruhi. "Oh man, I'm screwed." She then tried to get away again, but Haruhi got a hold of her hair before she could. "Ow, let go! That's mines!" She then also pulled onto her hair, hoping to get it from Haruhi's grip.

Unfortunately, Haruhi merely pulled hard and got onto her back. Holding onto Tsuruya-san's hair like reigns, she… started treating her like a horse. I was quickly reminded of the fact that Haruhi had done the exact same thing to me last Sunday. I facepalmed when I saw this, thinking that perhaps Haruhi was going a little too far.

"Giddy up, horsey! Get moving!"

Tsuruya-san complied, lifting up Haruhi as best as she could. She then began to walk on all fours around the ring. At first, I thought maybe she might have found this demeaning, but after a half a minute, I found that she was enjoying being ridden around. To her, it must've been like a game. The two of them went around the ring acting like a bunch of goofballs for another minute. Haruhi even went as far as slapping Tsuruya-san on the butt, another thing that I remembered. For some reason, it bothered the hell out of me to watch her do that. And no, it wasn't jealousy. There's no way I'd want Haruhi to do that to me again.

Soon after that, Koizumi blew the whistle, finally ending the match. Haruhi then got off of Tsuruya-san. The green haired girl collapsed in exhaustion right after that, rolling over onto her back to catch her breath. She still had a huge smile on her face with her cute little fang in full display. After a second, she picked herself up and took one last deep breath.

"Man she's strong," said Tsuruya-san "It's all I could do just to keep up with her."

"You did better than I thought you would," I said, giving her an encouraging smile.

Tsuruya-san responded by giving me the victory symbol as she hunched over weakly. I then turned to Haruhi, who had a confident smile on her. No doubt that once she finally got a hold of Tsuruya-san that she enjoyed the match considerably more. I was confident that there would be no closed spaces opening for now. I looked over to where Koizumi was, who was obtaining the results from the judges. It wasn't long before he returned to the center of the ring, megaphone in hand.

"The results are in! It's a unanimous decision! And that winner is…" Koizumi pauses for dramatic effect. Just tell us the results already!

"… Our one and only Brigade Chief, Haruhi Suzumiya-san!" He then lifted her arm into the air to show who the victorious one was.

I didn't have any real doubt that she'd won. With the exception of the first few minutes, she was in control of nearly the entire match. The crowd had a mixed reaction to the outcome but not as bad as the first match. Overall, I would say it was a pretty entertaining match. I looked into the crowd again to see the reactions of Haruhi's parents. Of course, Naru-san appeared pleased to see her daughter win, but what surprised me was the Oruki seemed pretty pleased as well. Perhaps at some point he'd gotten over his embarrassment and had begun to enjoy the match. I could only hope that was the case. The better he feels after the end of this contest, the less trouble I would be in afterwards.

I walked up to Haruhi after the announcement of her win. "Way to go, Haruhi. I figured you'd win."

"Of course," said Haruhi confidently before she looked at me suspiciously. "I know what you're trying to do!" She then pointed directly at my nose. "Don't think that your flattery is going to get you out of your penalty!"

To be honest, I'd forgotten all about that stupid penalty, but when I was reminded of it, I had a sudden feeling of tremendous dread. My match was supposed to be next, which meant I had to suffer my punishment now. I was practically in a state of panic as I tried to talk her out of it. "Please don't make me wear all of that! There has to be some other way!"

"My decision is final, Kyon! You should be lucky that I'm being as lenient as I am! I was going to make your punishment ten times worse!" She then put her hand on her chin to think. "Now… I just need a little time to put it on you."

I sunk my head in despair as Haruhi grabbed the hose to wash off all the mud off her body, still trying to think of a solution. It didn't take long before she apparently came up with an idea. She once again

gave off her million-watt smile. "I got it!" She then turned towards the others. "Koizumi, Tsuruya, Mikuru-chan! Come here!"

The three of them went up to Haruhi to see what she wanted. I wasn't able to hear what she was saying to them, but it didn't take long before I could hear Asahina-san beginning to whimper again followed by Tsuruya-san laughing.

"That's sound like an excellent idea," said Koizumi as he began to move towards the center of the ring.

Tsuruya-san then grabbed Asahina-san by the arm. "Come on, Mikuru-chan! It's our turn now!" She then began to pull her towards the ring as well.

"Wait! I don't want to do this again!" cried Asahina-san as she was forced back into the ring again.

After that, Koizumi addressed the crowd again. "Ladies and Gentlemen, we're scheduling an extra match for all of you! In just a moment, the losers of the first two rounds will face off to determine who outranks who! Will it be the sweet and lovely Mikuru Asahina, or the beautiful and energetic Tsuruya-san? We shall see!"

"Kyon!" came a voice from behind me. I turned around to find it was Haruhi, who now had a chair and… that bag that had the stuff I was supposed to… put on… She playfully smiled as she held up the bag and pointed to the chair, obviously wanting me to sit in it. I then realized that this whole match between Asahina-san and Tsuruya-san was her ploy to stall for time while Haruhi… prepared me for my punishment. Realizing that I could not get out of my fate, I slowly and weakly walked up to the chair and sat down. What sucked the most was the fact that the chair was facing away from the ring, so I wasn't going to be able to watch the match.

It was only seconds after I sat down that the third match started. "Ready. Set!" I then heard the whistle blow…

First things first, I'm SO sorry that I didn't get to the conclusion of the wrestling tournament with this chapter, but as you can see, this chapter was already ridiculously long (it's the longest one for this story yet). I feel guilty that I couldn't post it all at once, but hopefully it won't take long to write and post the rest of it.

This chapter was every bit as difficult to write as I thought it would be. I'm not quite sure if it's as good as I had hoped. I really wanted it to be enjoyable, and I would be sad if it wasn't. Anyway, hope to hear what you guys think! Thank you very, very much!

See you next chapter!

Chapter 20

First off, I want to apologize up and down for the delay of this chapter. I had family come in from out of town, and I had to spend time with them since I hadn't seen them in years. That and I also had to deal with the fact that my sister had given birth to my new baby nephew. Happy 0 th Birthday, Christian! I love you!

Anyway, thanks to some kind of error occurring on the website, I missed out on some feed back that I wanted for chapter 19. That kinda sucked because I was nervous about the chapter and wanted to see what people thought. What reviews that did get through seemed to be mostly positive, so I feel better. Still a little bit disappointed, though…

Anyway, this chapter will be the conclusion of the mud wrestling event and will conclude this story arc. This means that the next arc will be the final one (It's basically the Kyoto arc). I've basically split the story into five separate arcs, each one about a week long in time. This means that the story's climax will happen at Kyoto, but that's all I'm gonna tell you. He he he…

As always, hope you enjoy the chapter!

Chapter 20

Why do I allow myself to repeatedly become humiliated? Seriously by now, you'd think that I might actually enjoy being tortured like this. Well I don't, got it?! I had one moment where I wanted to get a little revenge on Haruhi. I just wanted to see her reaction when she got electrocuted. Sure, I knew I would pay for it later, but I figure it would be worth it. Of course, that didn't happen, since a certain someone's

father decided to shock me instead. Damn that bastard, Oruki! I hate him! HATE him!

So now I'm sitting here in this chair receiving my punishment with nothing to show for it. As of this moment, Haruhi was applying eye-liner to my eyes, a goofy grin on her face. She already forced me to take off my t-shirt and replace it with… the top of a bikini. It had blue and white vertical stripes with yellow straps. There's a bottom to it, too, but that obviously wouldn't fit so I didn't have to wear that. Not that it mattered anyway. I was already humiliated beyond belief.

Occasionally, Haruhi would crack up while she was busy applying the make-up. It was obvious that she was enjoying herself way to much putting this stuff on my face. And also, she would crack up at whatever antics Tsuruya-san and Asahina-san were up to. This made me even more irritated, as I was facing away from the ring and couldn't actually see what was happening.

"No! Don't touch me there! This is embarrassing!"

Dammit! I really wanted to see what's happening! Damn you, Haruhi!

"Quit your complaining, Kyon," commanded Haruhi as she began to put some mascara on my eye-lashes.

Oh, and if it wasn't already obvious by now, Haruhi is trying to turn me into a girl. I shuddered at the thought of what I might look like when she was done. I should have resisted with all my might, but I knew that would only result in something worse coming my way. No matter how I felt, it was probably best if I just sit back and endure this punishment.

What was making this worse was the fact that, well, since I couldn't turn my head and had to basically look straight, the only thing there was for me to look at was Haruhi herself. May I remind you that she's still wearing only a revealing bikini right now, and most of her assets were in full view? If I looked upward, I'd stare into Haruhi's beautiful face. Look down a bit, and I'm staring straight down her

impressive cleavage. Look further down, and I'm looking at her rather shapely and sexy legs… now I'm starting to sound like a perverted idiot. I could divert my eyes left or right, but doing so only gave me boring scenery to look at, and eventually my eyes would reset back into the middle. Looking at her made me really uncomfortable inside, especially in this stupid Speedo which was really tight and… forget I said that. My heart was racing again. I could feel myself sweating a bit too. Her face was way too close. These feelings… surfacing…

"What are you looking at?" asked Haruhi, looking a bit confused.

"You," I said without thinking. Realizing what I said, and noticing the rising blush on Haruhi's face, I quickly tried to correct myself. "B… because there's nothing else for me to look at."

I should have kept my mouth shut. Undoubtedly, that came off as very insulting. My worries were confirmed when Haruhi irately narrowed her eyes at me. I then noticed that she started applying the make up with a little less care, perhaps trying to injure me or something.

"No! Stop pulling on the straps! You're going to break them!" cried Asahina-san loudly.

I tried to turn my head to look, but Haruhi immediately grabbed my head and set it straight again.

"Hold still, idiot!" yelled Haruhi, her face showing clear signs of annoyance.

Damn you! Damn you! Damn you! Damn you! Damn you! Damn you! Damn you! I want to see this match so freaking badly! Anything to divert my eyes away from you!

"Too bad, Kyon! You should have thought about that this morning when you decided to take my father's side! It pisses me off just thinking about it!"

Yes, yes, I get it! You made that point abundantly clear already! Can we drop it?! Surely this stupid punishment will haunt me for the rest of my life! Is that not punishment enough?!

Haruhi only responded with a grunt as she took some blush and began to apply it to my cheeks. I continued to try and endue the next few minutes as she continued to apply the make-up. Her scowl quickly disappeared when she once again began to admire the results of my "transformation." Eventually, it came time to put on the lipstick, so she went into the bag and pulled out three different shades. One was a bright pink. Another was a rose red, and the last was a maroon color.

"Which one do you want to wear?" asked Haruhi with a devilish grin.

"Does it matter? It's all embarrassing."

"Pick one now before I pick!" yelled Haruhi as she shove the lipstick in my face. "And I guarantee you won't like what I pick!"

I sighed heavily before eventually pointing at the rose red one. I have no doubts that I'll be repressing these memories.

"Pucker up!" commanded Haruhi.

I only half complied, puckering up only partially. I guessed it was enough, since Haruhi went about applying the lipstick anyway.

"Now press your lips together so you get an even coat on your upper and lower lip!"

I reluctantly complied, noting that the feeling of lipstick was very uncomfortable. I was compelled to lick it off, but it didn't taste very good when I did.

"Idiot! Don't lick it!" yelled Haruhi as she went into her bag for something else. "Almost done! Now for the finishing touch!" She finally pulled out a long-haired wig and carefully placed it on my

head. The color was very close to my natural hair color. I began to wonder where the hell she gets all these wigs from. I remembered the time when Haruhi brought the Brigade to that ENOZ concert, having us dressed as eighties punk rockers wearing ridiculous wigs. Does she have some kind of hidden location in her room where she keeps all this stuff? It can't be healthy to have so many wigs for no apparent reason.

Haruhi stared me over after putting the wig one. "It's good… but could use something else… I know!" She then pulled out one last thing from her bag, a hair-tie. She then went behind me and used it on the wig. My only guess was that she was putting a ponytail on the wig.

I then heard the whistle blow, an indicator that the third match was finally over. I quickly turned my head to see what had happened. I saw Tsuruya-san standing up and facing the crowd, fists triumphantly in the air. Asahina-san was laying face first in the mud, looking completely exhausted. My heart went out to her once more. She'd been horribly abused during the course of this competition. It's okay, Asahina-san. It's all over for you now.

"Just in time!" exclaimed Haruhi as she looked at me. "Keep your head forward! I want everyone to look at you at once!"

What the hell's the point? Everyone's going to see me eventually anyway. Isn't this embarrassing enough?

Koizumi soon made his official announcements of the winner. It was Tsuruya-san, to absolutely no one's surprise. Almost no time had passed after the announcement that everyone ran over where I was to look at what Haruhi had done to me.

"Hold it!" declared Haruhi. "Stay right there! Kyon! Stand up!"

I robotically complied with her wishes, trying my best to be as emotionally distant to the situation as possible.

Haruhi placed her hands on my shoulders while still facing everyone else. "Everyone! I introduce to you the new and improved Kyon!" She then turned me immediately to face the rest of the Brigade plus Tsuruya-san.

Tsuruya-san's reaction was the most obvious, immediately busting out into hysterical laughter the moment she saw me. Koizumi was laughing as well, although he tried to keep it as reserved as he could. Asahina-san covered her mouth the moment she saw me, perhaps feeling so much shock at my condition that she forget about her own. Nagato merely stared at me, tilting her head ever so slightly. Apparently she found this new look of mine… confusing? Or maybe she was mildly curious.

Anyway, both Taniguchi and Kunikida were laughing heartily at my expense as well, with the former actually pointing directly at me. Sakanaka-san mere gave me a polite look of sympathy. Looking at the audience, I could tell that most of them were laughing at me, too. This made me feeling really humiliated. My mortification reached its peak when I looked at where Haruhi's parents were sitting. They… were both laughing at me. It's official now. My dignity was now completely gone. It was now floating somewhere over the peaks of Mount Fuji, forever out of my reach.

While I was looking at the crowd, I didn't notice Tsuruya-san pulling out her cellphone from of to the side and taking a picture of me. "Oh man, I'm definitely keeping this one! You're hot, Kyon-kun!" She then showed me the picture she took. Much to my chagrin, I looked way more feminine than I would have ever liked to. Apparently Haruhi did a good job with the make-up, and if it weren't for the subtle placement of the bone structures in my face, I would have passed for a girl for sure. And no, I wasn't admiring it. It made me sick to my stomach.

"It's time for the next match to begin!" announced Haruhi loudly as she grabbed the megaphone and walked to the middle of the ring. Koizumi and I soon followed, heading to our respective place.

Before we got into position, Koizumi said this to me. "You know, I have to admit that look suits you surprisingly well."

Shut up you smiling bastard! Just remember that this "girl" is going to kick your sorry ass! Then who's going to be the embarrassed one?!

When we were set on our respective sides of the ring, Haruhi began her announcement to the audience. "And now we begin the fourth round of this contest. This round is for you ladies! We have a special match-up between the two male representatives of the SOS Brigade. To my left, we have the handsome Vice-Chief Itsuki Koizumi! And to my right, we have the beautiful Kyonko!

Kyonko! Are you kidding me?! You're using a nickname to my nickname? Damn you Haruhi! You are so dead! Do you have any idea how many people are going to start calling me Kyonko now just because of this?!

Haruhi have me an evil smirk, perhaps an indication that she knew what she was doing. She then began to back up off the ring before grabbing the stopwatch and whistle. "Ready. Set! GO!" she yelled as she blew the whistle.

Neither Koizumi nor I charged one another immediately, both of us using the experience of the previous matches to remind us that doing so was unwise. We approached each other slowly and cautiously. We began to circle one another, trying to feel one another out. Koizumi had a confident smirk on his face while we did this, which made me more pissed off. I could also hear the girls in the crowd chanting away at his name. Yeah, so you're popular with the girls. Big deal! At least I'm sure the girls in the Brigade are on my side.

"Koizumi! I hereby order you to kick Kyon's ass!"

Okay, so Haruhi's probably still a little peeved at me for what happened this morning. Who cares about her anyway? I'm sure Tsuruya-san is on my side.

"Yeah, you can'ts lose to a girl, kay?"

Well, surely Asahina-san would definitely be rooting for me…

"Good luck you two!"

Well then, I'm sure Nagato… never mind. Even if she was rooting for me, she'd never show it.

Deciding to ignore the distractions around me, I lunged forward to grapple Koizumi. He returned the gesture at that exact same time, and we both locked together, grasping each other's shoulders. I began to push as hard as I could to try and move him back, but as expected, the mud gave zero traction, and I was unable to fully utilize my strength.

It was then that Koizumi did something unexpected. He slipped under my body and threw me over his back. As I was airborne for a second, I remembered thinking about how he could pull off such a quick and graceful maneuver. I was soon on my back, the soft mud cushioning my fall. I was slow to get up, still wondering what just happened. Koizumi stood there, giving me that stupid grin. That technique he used didn't even tire him out in the slightest. Dammit, I won't let you make me look any more foolish than I already do!

Letting my emotions get to me, I charged right at him, trying to tackle him. Koizumi was prepared for this, however and side-stepped out of the way and slipped his arm over the back of my neck. I was now being held down under Koizumi's armpit, unable to get away.

Koizumi leaned in towards my ear, getting way, way too close for comfort. "I must apologize, Kyon-kun, but I'm afraid that I have every intention of defeating you in this match. I ask that you don't take it personally."

"Go to hell!" I yelled while trying to remove my head from his arm. I didn't succeed, unfortunately. Koizumi reacted by leaping in the air and tucking in his weight. I wasn't able to hold up his weight in the

position I was in, and I soon fell face first right into the mud below. Koizumi rolled off of me a second later, giving me the opportunity to lift myself up. I tried to wipe the excess mud off my face while spitting from of it out. By the way, I was right. The mud tasted terrible.

While I was distracted by the mud on my face, Koizumi went behind me and grabbed me by the ankle. This caught me by surprise, and I reacted by trying to get away. I clawed at the mud to try and pull myself forward, but it was futile. It was like I was clawing at nothing. Try as I might, I was at the mercy of the smiling bastard. Koizumi soon utilized his advantage by flinging me to the other side of the ring. I slid on my slide toward the edge of the ring, soon realizing that he was kicking the crap out of me.

I was forced to get up again, already starting to feel a bit winded. I could not understand how he was making me look so pathetic. By looks alone, he didn't look like he was in much better shape than me. Despite this, I was starting to lose some of my confidence.

I bolted at him again, only this time I had my arms in a more defensive position. It probably wasn't wise to that, as Koizumi merely evaded me once again. This time, however, he grabbed me by the strap to the bikini top. The top stretched a bit, causing the strap to dig into my sides. I kept trying to move forward, trying to escape Koizumi's grip.

"Damn you, Kyon!" yelled Haruhi. "If you break that top, I'll have your head!"

Why are you yelling at me? Yell at Koizumi! He's the one holding onto it!

"Koizumi! Let go of it now!" commanded Haruhi.

Koizumi immediately complied, causing me to fall flat on my face again, since I was leaning against him too much. I could hear the crowd plus most of the Brigade start laughing at me. I couldn't believe I could be so stupid.

The next couple minutes, I found myself continuously frustrated as all of my efforts to defeat Koizumi. One time, I dove for his legs to trip him up, but his legs were so slippery that I wasn't able to get a hold of him. I also repeatedly tried to grab his arms, but doing that didn't do any good, either. Whether I wanted to admit it or not… I had to eventually realize that… Koizumi… was… stronger than me. Not only that, but his stamina and endurance were superior as well. Dammit, it sucked to admit that.

Eventually, Koizumi had me on my back, with his elbow resting on my neck. Try as I might, I couldn't get him off of me. I found that the mere five or so minutes that had past felt like an eternity. I didn't even want to think about what it would be like to go through a second round like the girls had to.

Koizumi leaned his face close to mine again, making feel extremely uncomfortable again. "I'll admit that you fought admirably, but the advantage is clearly mine. If I were you, I would try to save as much energy as you can. You look exhausted enough as it is."

Damn you, Koizumi! It can't end like this! I said I'd kick you ass, and I have every intention of doing so! I looked at the girls standing off to the side. Nagato's expression was blank as always, and Asahina-san had a look of concern. Tsuruya-san had an excited grin and was likely to enjoy the match no matter how it went. Haruhi, on the other hand, held her fist up in front of her, watching us intently. She… looked disappointed, or maybe even worried. Did she actually secretly want me to win, even after what she said earlier? Of course, right? After all, I am the guy she likes. Damn, I can't lose like this!

It was at this point that I decided that I absolutely had to win, no matter what. Even if it meant doing some… underhanded things, I was going to regain the upper hand. First things first, I had to get Koizumi off of me. I knew I couldn't muscle him off of me, so I tried to think of some alternative way to do it. It was then that I remembered the lessons in pressure points that Oruki had taught me. While certainly low, it wasn't specified in the rules that I couldn't use them. I reached my hand right into the spot that rested between Koizumi's

collarbone and his shoulder muscle and pushed down hard. Soon after I did that, Koizumi reacted to the sudden pain by rolling away, giving me an opportunity to finally get up.

I was heavily winded, but at least I wasn't pinned down anymore. Koizumi soon got up too, giving me a sharp glare without losing his smile.

"Pretty sneaky of you to do that."

"Shut up, you bastard!" I yelled as I tried to think of what to do next. Koizumi was already moving in to try and take me down again. I tried to keep my distance while I wracked my brain for ideas. Anything would obviously be helpful in trying to defeat him.

I then had a moment of inspiration. It came when I noticed a drop of mud coming from the wig on my head landing on my nose. It gave me a great idea. I slowly reached for the end of the wig's ponytail and grabbed a hold of it. Just when Koizumi wasn't expecting it, I pulled the wig off my head and swung in around like a flail and clocked him in the head with it. Since the wig was soaked in mud, it had a surprising amount of weight to it, plus it was somewhat sticky. It hit with a squishing sound and rocked his head slightly. It also blinded him a bit as some of the mud got right into his eye. Koizumi stepped back a few paces when this happened while holding his left eye. This was my chance! Go for it!

Without thinking it further, I charged Koizumi with all the strength and ferocity I could manage. I positioned my shoulder perfectly to hit him right in the chest when I collided into him. It was a tremendous hit. I could tell since it hurt my shoulder a little when it happened. Koizumi was soon knocked back from the blow and fell into his back, with me landing right on top of him.

"Damn you, Kyon! You're not supposed to take it off!" yelled Haruhi in the background, clearly talking about the stupid wig. I also noted that Tsuruya-san was practically dying from laughter right now.

I ignored the both of them and immediately positioned myself directly on top of Koizumi. From what I could tell, he had an expression of great discomfort and appeared to be gasping for air. It was then that I realized that I had just knocked the wind out of him. There was a part of me that wanted to wait for him to recover, but I knew that if I did that I would lose the advantage. Instead, I decided to capitalize on his condition and I started to fling mud into his face repeatedly.

"Let's see how pretty you look after I'm done with you!"

Koizumi was unable to respond and could only react by raising his arms to try and block the incoming barrage of mud being flung at him. Eventually, I could see him struggling to get me off of him, perhaps desperate for some air. Knowing that I didn't really want to actually kill him (even if doing so would assure my victory), I eventually got off to give him a brief chance to regain his breath. Truthfully, I needed to regain my breath a bit, too.

I watched as Koizumi got onto one knee and was able to finally breathe. He looked at me again with a mixture of what appeared to be excitement and annoyance, although I could tell he was trying to hide both. Eventually, he got to his feet again, no longer desperate for air. I soon regretted not pressing the attack, since now I really had nothing to surprise him with. I didn't have my wig anymore, and even if I did, I'd doubted that Koizumi would fall for the same trick twice. It wasn't long before Koizumi charged at me, intent on tackling me.

I braced for the impact and caught it just in time. I found myself sliding backwards as Koizumi pushed me back. It wasn't long before my feet hit the side of the ring, where the mud suddenly ended and was replaced with grass. I found that my traction had been regained and I stopped sliding back. Koizumi, however, was still on the mud and now could no longer push me back since his feet merely slipped whenever he tried to take a step forward. Try as he might, he couldn't push my back any further. I soon realized I had an important advantage. There were never any rules made up about wrestling outside the ring. In the rush to get things together, it was one of

those things we simply never thought about. So technically, using the edge of the ring was completely legal since there was no rule again it. I smile eagerly when I realized this. Now was my chance to get Koizumi good.

I pushed Koizumi down a bit and wrapped my arms around his torso. I then began to try and lift him with all my might. This was no small feat, especially since I was pretty exhausted by this point. I grunted with the strained, pushing my muscles to their absolute limits. I wasn't sure if I could do it until I suddenly felt Koizumi's feet leave the ground. Once I got him off the ground a bit, picking him up the rest of the way was a bit easier. I watched as his legs flailed around a bit before I prepared to walk forward. Ignoring the fact that his butt was practically in my face, I took three steps and slammed him directly into the mud.

The crowd seemed to really be getting into the action now, as were the judges and Brigade members. I supposed that they were happy see something other than the one-sided match that it was a few minutes ago.

Despite the incredible fatigue I felt in my whole body, I pushed myself to continue the attack. I took a few steps back, ran forward and performed a drop kick right onto Koizumi's chest. After doing so, I slowly got back up and readied myself to try a body slam next. Unfortunately, Koizumi made it his feet as well. He was finally starting to show some signs of weariness as well, although I'd say he was still looking better than I did. We began to circle each other tiredly, either of us trying to get in one last spectacular move before the match ended.

I decided to try and dive at Koizumi one last time. Unfortunately, Koizumi evaded the attack just in time, causing me to fall on my chest. I turned onto my back to try and defend against Koizumi's immediate counter, but he was able to get on top of me anyway. It appeared to be over now, as I definitely didn't have the strength to get him off me now. Luckily for me, I had one last trick up my sleeve. Swallowing hard, I reached behind Koizumi and grabbed the top of

his Speedo. I then pulled as hard as I possibly could with all my might, giving him the biggest wedgie I could possibly give him. It didn't take long before I could see the incredible discomfort on his face as his eyes suddenly widened. He soon got off of me to try and fix his condition.

I didn't give him time to recover. I immediately got on top of him to try and pin him down. I then noticed that the wig was now within my reach. I went for it and picked it up. I then immediately put it on Koizumi's face, forcing him to wear it like that.

"There you go! That's definitely an improvement if you ask me!"

Before Koizumi could respond, I heard the whistle blow. The match was finally over…

Koizumi and I were now standing in the middle of the ring while we waited for Haruhi to collect the final results from the judges. I was still hunched over, my stamina completely drained. Even when Haruhi finally walked between us to announce the results, I still hadn't quite caught my breath.

"We now have the results, and it's a split decision!"

Split decision, huh? Well, at least someone thought I had won. I honestly didn't expect to win, since I basically had to use some really underhanded tricks to get the upper hand.

Haruhi paused a bit to build up the excitement. "And the winner is…"

Just tell them the winner already!

"Kyonko!"

Damn you, Haruhi! Did you really have to use that stupid… wait a minute… I won? I won! I can't believe it! In your face, Koizumi! I cheered loudly upon realizing my victory, a sudden burst of energy returning from nowhere. Haruhi raised my arm up to show that I was

the victorious one. There were tons of boos from the crowd, most of which were girls, but it seemed that there were a healthy number of cheers as well. Perhaps they were swayed from my come-from-behind performance. I looked at where Naru-san and Oruki were sitting. They were both cheering, obviously wanting me to be the victor of the match.

I then felt someone leap onto my back. "Way to go, Kyon-kun! That was megas awesome and funny!"

"Thanks," I said as I turned to look at her. "Can you get off now?" I mostly asked her this because I was still pretty beat from my match, but I also didn't want Haruhi to get jealous again.

Tsuruya-san quickly complied and then raced off towards Koizumi to pat him on the back for a great effort. Koizumi looked a bit disappointed with the results, but hid it as well as he could. Asahina-san also congratulated me as well. I then turned to Haruhi, who had a serious look on her face. "How'd I do?"

Haruhi crossed her arms and looked away. "Cheater."

Hey, I am not a cheater! Everything I did was totally legal!

"Whatever," said Haruhi as she turned away from me and began to walk toward her designated spot in the ring. "And don't think I've forgotten that you disobeyed the conditions of your punishment, Kyon! Taking the wig off in the middle of the match was not allowed!"

Give me a break. How else was I going to win? Wasn't I embarrassed enough as it was?

I ultimately decided to ignore Haruhi's complaint and washed the mud and make-up off of me. While I was doing this, Nagato and Koizumi joined Haruhi in the ring to prepare for the final round of this god-forsaken tournament.

As expected, Koizumi was the announcer for the match. Bringing the megaphone to his mouth, he then addressed the crowd. "Alright, Ladies and Gentlemen! We are now beginning the final round of tonight's show. And it promises to be a great one! To my left, we have the mysterious Yuki Nagato! And to my right, we have the incredible, ambitious, inspirational, stunning, amazing, one and only leader of our club, Haruhi Suzumiya-san!

I tried my best to ignore Koizumi's brown-nosing again and walked up as close to Nagato as I could. Given her indescribable hearing, I decided to say one thing to her in a whisper, even through I was a good three meters away.

"Give her hell, Nagato."

Nagato turned towards me, and stared at me with her cool, almost crystalline eyes. I then saw her nod in an almost unperceivable fashion. Confident that she heard me, I walked back to my designated spot to get ready to watch the match. Ultimately, I wanted this match to be as exciting as possible, and I just wanted to be sure that Nagato understood not to hold back this time.

I could see Haruhi was taking this match 100% seriously. She always looked at Nagato as a rival, seeing as she was the only girl… nay person at school that could match her physical prowess. She knew winning this match would be hard and would take everything she had. One thing was for certain. This match was not going to be about fanservice.

Koizumi brought the whistle close to his face while holding up the stopwatch. "Ready. Set!" He then blew the whistle, signaling the start of the match.

Almost immediately, both Haruhi and Nagato ran forward and grappled each other. They initially appeared evenly matched as they both struggled to overpower one another. It didn't help that the mud gave neither of them anything close to any traction. Eventually, Haruhi got underneath Nagato and threw her over her shoulder. It

initially appeared to be the first successfully attack of the match, but by some insane wonder, Nagato had managed to land on her feet.

Without giving Haruhi any time to react, Nagato bolt directly at her opponent in a blur of speed and leapt into the air. She landed directly onto Haruhi's shoulders, straddling her head between her legs. She then leaned back and placed her hands on the ground while squeezing Haruhi's head with her thighs. In an amazing display of acrobatics, Nagato then launched Haruhi forward with her legs. Completely, caught off guard by the technique, Haruhi could do nothing to defend herself as she went airborne for the first time this round. She soon landed on her back, bouncing a couple times before coming to a rest.

Haruhi appeared stunned as she attempted to get herself up. She didn't really get anytime to do so, though, since Nagato immediately continued the attack by gracefully leaping into the air and positioning her elbow to land directly on her opponent's chest. Haruhi reacted just in time by rolling out of the way. She then countered by getting up and bull rushing Nagato. Nagato was in the process of getting up herself and wasn't able to defend against the attack. Haruhi's shoulder collided into Nagato's chest, knocking the silver-haired alien onto her back. Haruhi then leapt onto her and attempted to pin her down.

Nagato expertly defended herself against Haruhi's attempts to hold her down, and eventually managed to get positioned so her feet were pressed right into Haruhi's stomach. Realizing what Nagato was trying to do, I saw Haruhi's eyes widen. Unfortunately for her, it was too late to prevent what happened next. Nagato kicked both her legs forward, launching Haruhi backwards. She flew nearly two meters before she finally landed in her back again, sliding another meter before coming to a rest.

Haruhi was clearly starting to show obvious frustration. There were few people on the planet as competitive as her, and she wanted to win badly. Regrettably, Nagato was proving to be every bit as difficult to defeat as anyone expected. Just as Haruhi was up on her feet

again, Nagato bolted forward like a flash of lightening. Reacting with a speed that could only be described as superhuman, Haruhi sidestepped Nagato's attack and grabbed her by her arm. She then swung the quiet bookworm with all her strength and flung her as far as she could. Still, Nagato defied logic by somehow still landing on her hands and feet, sliding back towards the edge of the ring. It seemed impossible for one to be able to throw Nagato without her catching herself.

I was completely engrossed in the match, watching the two of them go back and forth with attacks and counterattacks. Mostly, I was amazed by Nagato's speed and agility. Without a doubt, Haruhi was out matched in those two areas, and it was looking like Haruhi was becoming a bit overwhelmed. Sure, the match wasn't completely one-sided, but I had to give Nagato the slight edge.

Koizumi moved up next to me, likely to try and talk my ear off once again. "This is turning out to be quite the match, isn't it?"

Shut up and go away! I'm trying to watch the match!

Koizumi chuckled before continuing. "By the way, I must admit that I was… impressed by your resourcefulness during out match. I regret that I was unprepared to defend against such tactics."

Good for you! Can you not see that I'm trying to watch the match?

Koizumi leaned in close to me, once again violating my personal space. "You seem distracted and concerned. Are you worried that she's going to lose?"

I moved away from him to get him out of my space bubble before responding. "What are you talking about?"

Koizumi put his hand on his chin, giving me that ever annoying smile. "Suzumiya-san is definitely struggling against Nagato-san. Am I wrong that you're troubled by this fact?"

I decided to try and ignore his question and focus my eyes on the ring again.

By now, Nagato had managed to get Haruhi in a headlock. Haruhi once again tried to power her way out of it the same way she did with Tsuruya-san, but this proved to be a futile effort. Not only was Nagato likely stronger than Tsuruya-san, but I suspected that Haruhi was at least a littler weaker now than she was earlier. Either way, Haruhi absolutely had to find a way out of this hold, or she'd lose the match for sure.

Giving up on powering out of the hold, Haruhi tried a different move. She threw herself backwards and slammed Nagato into the ground below. The impact from her doing that was just enough to momentarily loosen Nagato's grip, allowing Haruhi to slip her arms inside and break the hold. She then rolled away and got up again, putting her hands up defensively.

Out of curiosity, I looked back up to the crowd where Haruhi's parents were located. Naru-san herself was looking increasingly concerned, probably worried that her daughter could lose. Oruki, on the other hand, was now standing, his fists flying in the air. He was obviously really engrossed into the match now, his expression oozing with excitement. I was reminded of the time when Oruki instructed me on how it was the fan's responsibility to try and transfer their energy into the team or athlete that they were rooting for. I wondered if Oruki thought he was transferring his energy and spirit in his daughter right now.

My eyes returned to Haruhi and Nagato. Watching them struggle, I realized that I was focusing so much on each passing moment that it felt that time itself was beginning to slow. My heart was pounding in anticipation and excitement. I eagerly awaited the next big move that would be made that would electrify the crowd. My eyes barely blinked at all, not wanting to miss a single second.

I realized one other thing. Whether I'd like to admit it or not, Koizumi was right. Despite all the crap she put me through today, I wanted

Haruhi to win…

It was at this exact moment that the match began change. Haruhi had managed to pull Nagato under her armpit and lifted her up and performed a suplex. Upon landing, both opponents immediately got up, not allowing each other the chance to be taken advantage of while on the ground. I noticed something, however. For the first time, Nagato was slower to get up than Haruhi.

I then became aware of something. I had figured that Nagato had refrained from using her powers during this match, but even so, she was quite a force to be reckoned with. In terms of speed and agility, she was unmatched, even by Haruhi. She could repeatedly beat Haruhi and anyone else in a sprint with relative ease. However, when it came to the marathon during our school's athletics festival last year, she lost to Haruhi. This could only mean one thing. Even Nagato had her limits. While Nagato was definitely faster and more agile than Haruhi, when it came to stamina and endurance, it was Haruhi who had the advantage.

When Nagato charged forward to tackle the Brigade Chief, my suspicions seemed confirmed when even I noticed a significant decrease in her speed. Granted, she was still extremely fast, but now it seemed her quickness had decreased just enough that it allowed Haruhi to follow her movements. Haruhi swiftly evaded the charge and turned around to face Nagato's backside. Nagato stop running the moment she missed and slid to a stop. She then turn around and leapt in the air again. It appeared that she was attempting to land on Haruhi's shoulders again to do that ridiculous flip. However, this time Haruhi was ready for it. She caught Nagato just as she was about to land on her and slammed her into the ground in what could only be regarded as a brilliant counter maneuver.

Nagato did not give Haruhi time to revel in her handy work, as she soon after performed a sweep kick and tripped Haruhi off her feet. After Haruhi landed on her back, Nagato bounded onto Haruhi to try and pin her down. Haruhi counter instantly by kicking her away.

Haruhi then got on top of Nagato to try and pin her down. The two of them continued to wrestling furiously on the ground like this for almost a minute until Nagato made what appeared to be her final mistake. She allowed her arm to be gotten a hold of, allowing Haruhi to capitalize on this by quickly performing an arm bar.

She wrapped her legs around Nagato's arm and began to twist it in what could only be described as a ridiculously painful fashion. This move served to both pin the opponent and force them to forfeit because of the pain.

"I got you now, Yuki-chan!" yelled Haruhi as she tightened the hold a little bit more.

I knew Nagato wasn't in any actual pain. I watched this girl get pierced with a half-dozen spears without so much as a flinch. I was pretty confident that she didn't actually have any pain receptors. Who the hell needs them when you can regenerate damage within seconds? Pain receptors would be meaningless of humans could also do that. Nevertheless, I knew Nagato was stuck. Even if she wasn't actually hurting, she was still pinned down. That didn't stop her from trying to escape, though.

"Stop struggling or I'll break your arm!" commanded Haruhi as she continued to hold the arm bar. I didn't think Haruhi would actually break Nagato's arm, but even if she did, I wasn't concerned. Remember, super-fast regeneration?

It was then that Koizumi finally blew the whistle. I was completely surprised by this. I couldn't believe that ten minutes had passed already. Nevertheless, the last match was finally over. All that was left was to discover the final results of the match.

"That was totally awesome, nyoro~!" yelled Tsuruya-san in an explosion of energy.

"Great job you two!" cheered Asahina-san.

I merely stood there and smiled as I watched Haruhi let go of Nagato and help her to her feet. Yep, it was an awesome match. I suspect that the audience must've felt that they got their money's worth.

Shortly afterward, Koizumi returned to the middle of the ring with the results of the match. I was feeling incredibly anxious to hear them, knowing that this was definitely another close match.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, it appears we have another split decision!" announced Koizumi with as much pizzazz as possible. "It certainly was an incredible match, and even the judges themselves admit that it was difficult to choose, but alas, we do indeed have a winner!"

Announce it already before I punch you!

"And the winner is…

…

…

…

The one and only Haruhi Suzumiya-san!"

I felt a tremendous relief when I heard the results, feeling strangely good knowing Haruhi obtained a well-earned victory. The crowd had a mixture of cheers and hisses, an obvious sign that it was impossible to please everyone. I didn't really care. I did of course notice that both of Haruhi's parents were cheering elatedly with their daughter's victory. Did they even remember that they were supposed to be upset at her?

After Koizumi raised Haruhi's arms to show that she was the victorious one, Haruhi jumped in pure joy, clearly satisfied that she was able to pull through. I decided it was polite to approach Nagato first to try and cheer her up, even though I somehow doubted she needed it.

"You did a great job, Nagato. That way awesome."

Nagato turned to me and stared directly into my eyes. It was subtle, but I think I detected a minute amount of fulfillment in her expression. Perhaps it was enough for her to be recognized for her efforts.

After that, I went up to Haruhi to congratulate her on her win. "Way to go, Haruhi."

Haruhi took a deep breath before answering me, evidently still a bit winded from the match. "I knew Yuki-chan would be tough, so I had to give it all I had. What kind of example would I make as Brigade leader if I can't prove that I'm the best?"

"Well you definitely did that," I said as I held up my hand, waiting for a high five.

Haruhi stared me down a bit before complying and giving me a high five. However, she then grabbed me by my arm and pulled me down into the mud. She then got on my back and started yelling.

"I declare that we have a free-for-all match right now! Everyone for his or herself!"

"Get off of me!" I yelled, trying to get up.

I watched as Tsuruya-san began to pull Asahina-san back into the ring. "Let's get'em Mikuru-chan!"

"Wait! I don't want to get muddy again!" protested the young time-traveler uselessly as she was tossed into the mud with the rest of us.

And so, Haruhi, Tsuruya-san, Asahina-san, Koizumi and I all participated in an unofficial free-for-all round while Nagato stood on the edge of the ring and hosed us down. It was a lot of fun, even if I got my butt kicked.

The tournament was now officially over and everyone who came to watch had now left. The six of us had to stay behind to try and dispose of all the evidence that was on the field. In other words, Koizumi and I had to shovel up all the mud and transport it out of site. It was arduous work, especially since I was completely pooped by now. To make things worse, those bastards Taniguchi and Kunikida snuck off after the show was over to avoid having to help us. I still need to figure out which one of them voted against me at the end of my match. I figured it was probably Taniguchi, perhaps as revenge for me messing with him earlier this week.

While I was working, I noticed that Haruhi was chatting with Tsuruya-san from out in the distance, too far for me to hear them. After a couple minutes, I heard Tsuruya-san laughing her ass off.

"Oh my god! You thought that he was into me?! No way!"

She was loud enough that anyone could hear her from a dozen kilometers away. I was able to figure out from that blurb that Haruhi was probably talking about her suspicion that I liked Tsuruya-san. Hopefully, Tsuruya-san's comment would finally put the matter to rest.

Another half-hour later, I heard Tsuruya-san yell again. "You're really going to do it?! Go for it, Haruhi-nyan! You gots my support!" She then gave Haruhi a huge hug.

I was confused as to what Tsuruya-san was talking about. Apparently, Haruhi was planning something. Whatever she was planning, I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

It would be about another hour before we finally finished cleaning up. When we were done, we all snuck inside the school and got changed back into our school clothes. By now it was dark, which meant that we had to get home as soon as possible… Actually now that I think about it, I wasn't looking forward to getting home. Who knows what Oruki was going to do to us when we got back?

"I can't believe we did so well!" exclaimed Haruhi, holding the box full of cash while we walked home. "We totally made a killing!"

And indeed we did. We did so well in fact that the cash box was considerably heavy. I hadn't gotten a chance to count it all, but no doubt there was more than enough there to fund the trip… lucky me…

"I'm just happy I won," I said, still feeling pretty satisfied with myself.

Haruhi turned her head away from me. "That shouldn't count! You resorted to trickery to win!"

"And what? Faking an injury in order to get a hold of Tsuruya-san doesn't count?"

"Next year, I'll make sure that all those moves are made illegal!" declared the Brigade Chief. "Next time, you'll have to win fair and square! And that doesn't even cover the fact that you took off the wig before the match was up, which is a violation of a direct order."

"Come on. Give me a break."

Haruhi narrowed her eyes at me while pouting a bit. It was a really cute expression that indicated that she wasn't really upset at me about it. She then held the cash box to my face. "As punishment, you must carry this the rest of the way home."

I quickly snatched the box from her hands. "Why thank you! I think I'll keep this all to myself!"

"Jerk!" yelled Haruhi as she playfully tugged on my ear. "You try anything of the sort and you'll regret it for the rest of my life!"

"Ow! Let go! I get it!" I yelled as she let go.

We were relatively quiet the rest of the way home, which was fine with me. I kept stealing glances at her despite my desire not to do so. Even under the growing darkness, I couldn't help but feel that

she glowed almost as brightly as the street lights themselves. She looked genuinely happy and perhaps a bit anxious. My thoughts returned to whatever she told Tsuruya-san earlier. What was she planning? Didn't it involve the trip to Kyoto, or was it something else? No doubt I'd find out eventually.

About fifteen minutes later, we finally returned home. Haruhi announced her return cheerfully to her parents while we removed our shoes. I was relieved that Oruki was not standing behind the door waiting for us. Were we off the hook? I certainly hoped so.

I found Oruki sitting on the couch with the newspaper in hand. "Hi honey. How was your fundraiser?" It should be noted that he asked this with his teeth clenched, visibly still upset over the whole ordeal. He held onto the paper so tightly that it wrinkled in his hands.

Haruhi didn't seem to notice his expression as she headed for the stairs. "It went great! We made a ton of money!"

"Did you have fun?" asked Naru-san as she popped her head out from the kitchen.

Haruhi turned towards her mother just before she got to the steps. "Yeah, it was okay."

"Wonderful," said Naru-san with a cheerful smile. "Dinner will be done soon, okay?"

Haruhi raised an eyebrow in surprised. "You haven't finished dinner, yet? It's already pretty late?"

Naru-san stumbled with her words as she tried to come up with an excuse. "Oh… uh… well… you said that you were going to be late, so I decided to wait before cooking dinner so it would be done when you guys returned."

Satisfied with the answer, Haruhi shrugged and began to walk up the steps.

It was then that Naru-san said one more thing. "Oh, by the way, congratulations on your victory you two." Naru-san covered her mouth immediately when she realized what she just said.

Haruhi immediately darted her eyes back towards her mother upon hearing this. Her eyes widened horror as the color drained from her face. "You were there?!"

Naru-san became incredibly flustered as she tried to come up with some kind of excuse. "Uh… um… uh…" Her eyes kept glancing at me, as if looking for a clue as for what to say. Stop looking at me! If you don't then…

Haruhi then turned toward me, her eyes widening even more. "You knew?!" I was at a loss for words as I watched Haruhi's face go from nearly white to beet red from embarrassment. I'm so dead.

"Just so you know, Kyon-kun," came a relatively deep voice from behind me. "You make a pretty hot chick." I turned to find Oruki standing before me, arms crossed while smiling smugly. "Now what should I do with you two? I'm pretty pissed you lied about your fundraiser, so I can't let you both go unpunished. Hmmm…"

Haruhi and I were speechless as we watched him think up and announce our punishment…

FINALLY! It's done! Those were easily the hardest chapters I've ever written. Doing nearly four action scenes one right after the other was a huge pain, but hopefully the effort was worth it. I truly hope beyond hope that you guys enjoyed the chapter. I'm going to try and get the next chapter out some time this weekend, since you guys waited long enough. Anyway, I see ya later!

Chapter 21

I'm sorry this chapter wasn't finished sooner. Some things came up that slowed me down. I did write this chapter as fast as I possibly could, seeing as you guys waited far too long for the last chapter. Sorry again…

This chapter will be more focused on character development than the last few chapters had been. Hopefully, this one will be as much for you to read as it was for me to write.

As always, please enjoy the chapter!

Chapter 21

It is now Saturday, and all thoughts regarding that stupid fundraiser are now ancient memories that will forever be buried as deep inside my subconscious as possible. I will forever wonder what could have been had I had the brains to keep my mouth shut. Now, thanks to my idea, we have more than enough money to fund the trip, which means that now it was definitely going to happen.

I could barely believe it, but in less than a week, the whole Brigade was going to be trudging away all over a city looking for things I knew we weren't going to find just so that we could shove it in the face of some elderly guy whose only crime was being the symbol of everything Haruhi and the Brigade stood against.

Wow, try saying that last sentence with only one breath. It's almost impossible.

Anyway, none of that was terribly important as of right now, since at this very moment I had other things to worry about. Right now, I was in the kitchen. Why? Well, I was tasked with the responsibility of

cleaning it from top to bottom, with the condition that it would be "spotless" when I was done.

This was my punishment for lying to Oruki, or at least part of it. For most of the day, I would be forced to clean anything and everything that bastard saw fit. That was okay, though, because I wasn't the only one. For once, Haruhi was forced to do some cleaning around the house as well. Right at this very moment, she was washing the bathroom. I filled my soul with a strange sense of satisfaction knowing that she was up there scrubbing her life away.

The both of us had to clean whatever Oruki wanted us to clean or else the money we earned would be taken away. Of course, Oruki was actually bluffing about this, since he knew the dangers of upsetting his daughter now, but fortunately, Haruhi took him seriously. Oruki was originally worried about punishing her daughter, and he asked me later if there would be any problems. I assured him that while she would obviously not be happy, I doubted the world would be in serious jeopardy because of it. At most, a relatively small closed space might open, which would be nothing more than a mild inconvenience to Koizumi and his esper pals. Upon hearing this, he seems satisfied. In fact, he seemed almost amused by the idea of making "Mr. Smiles" suffer a bit.

I was currently undergoing the task of scrubbing the kitchen floor. I personally would have preferred to use a mop, but Oruki insisted on me getting on my hands and knees, saying that "a mop would make things too easy on you." I grimaced a bit as I scrubbed the hell out of a stain on the floor that refused to come out. I was incredibly bored with this task and wish nothing more than to be done with all of it.

It was then that Haruhi entered the kitchen, carrying a bucket. She was wearing a light green, flowery bandana on her head, which I had to admit looked really cute on her. I wanted to laugh at her a bit since seeing her actually working was a real treat, but I held it back when I noticed the sour look on her face.

"Stupid Kyon!" she said as she walked up to the kitchen sink.

What are you mad at me for? What did I do?

"I can't believe you knew my parents were there, and you didn't say anything."

"Hey, what could I do?" I asked, shrugging my shoulders. "What would you have done if I had told you? Cancel the event? It was way too late to do that. I knew if I had told you, you would've been embarrassed and the show wouldn't have been nearly as good."

Haruhi didn't respond. Instead, she went and dumped the bucket full of dirty, brown water down the sink. Some of it splashed onto the counter and floor, which annoyed the hell out of me since I just cleaned those areas.

"Did you really have to do that?" I asked in an irritated tone. "Couldn't you have dumped that down the shower drain?"

"What? I'm not doing that! I just cleaned it!"

Oh, so it okay then to make me clean everything all over again just because you didn't want to do it up there? Thanks.

"Whatever," responded Haruhi as she started to fill the bucket with fresh, clean water. "We're only doing this because my parents found out about that stupid tournament. You have no idea how embarrassed I am right now."

"Hey, at least they enjoyed themselves watching it, and they paid for the tickets, too."

Haruhi looked at me in exasperation. "And that's supposed to make me feel better? How would you feel if you knew your parents were there?"

I'd probably want to die. Hell, I'm pretty sure if my sister heard you call me Kyonko she'd probably call me that from now on.

"Exactly!" yelled Haruhi as she shut the water off. She them picked the bucket up and marched out of the room, spilling a bit more water on the floor. Damn you, Haruhi! Can't you have a little consideration?!

When I finally finished cleaning the kitchen, Haruhi and I were forced to wash all the windows in the house, vacuum and dust all the rooms, and cleaned a few other things that needed it.

Eventually, Haruhi stood in front of Oruki while he made his final inspection of the house.

"Hmm," said Oruki as he nodded the house slowly. "Looks like the house is pretty clean."

We gave a sigh of relief. I knew we were both sick of cleaning.

"Now you can wash and wax my car."

I slumped my shoulders in defeat, but Haruhi was more vocal. "What? Are you kidding me?"

"I didn't say you were done. Go wash my damn car, or that money of yours is mine!"

Haruhi and I reluctantly went outside where the car was parked with what we needed. When we were ready to start, Haruhi decided to divvy up the responsibilities.

"Kyon, you're going to do the outside while I clean the interior."

Great. Give me the hard job. Since Oruki was good at making sure the car stayed clean, there wasn't much for Haruhi to do except wipe down everything and vacuum, which I figured would only take fifteen minutes at most. What Haruhi planned to do after that, I'm not sure. I'm certain she won't help me finish, unless her father told her to.

After about ten minutes, I found myself rinsing the car down after I gave it its first scrubbing. I saw Haruhi leaning inside the car, her butt

sticking out of the door. I felt a tremendous urge to aim the hose right at there. I waited about a minute before I decided to do it. I put my thumb down on the opening to the hose and allowed to water to start shooting forward. I then quickly aimed the stream direct at her butt and pulled it away.

Haruhi screamed briefly before getting out of the car and staring daggers at me. "How dare you?!"

"Oops, sorry," I said, obviously not sincere. "It was an accident."

"Liar!" yelled Haruhi as she went to the bucket filled with soapy water and pull out the large sponge. "You're going to pay for what you did?"

She then threw the sponge at me. I tried to dodge it, but Haruhi's aim was perfect, and it beaned me square in the face. I retaliated by spraying her some more. The two of us completely forgot about the damn car and started having a water fight. Haruhi grabbed the bucket and splashed all the water on me, leaving me drenched in water and soap. Within a minute, we were both completely soaked.

"Quit goofing off!" came a voice from behind us. I turned around to find Oruki staring at us angrily from the window. "Don't make me have to come out there!"

Haruhi and I sighed before finally returning to wash the car.

It took an hour and a half to do the whole car, and that was mostly because of the waxing. Waxing a car sucks, by the way. I definitely wouldn't want to do that again. I can still feel my arms aching from how hard I had to rub the wax on.

Oruki finally let us off the hook when we finished the car. When we were done, I asked Oruki for his newspaper, telling him that I needed to look for places again. After getting another classifieds page, I went up to my room to start reading. Haruhi took the opportunity to go out

and take care of all the expenses that would be needed for the trip, and Oruki left to go to work. This meant that it was only Naru-san and myself in the house.

I spent the next hour trying to find a place, but I wasn't able to find anything affordable that I hadn't looked at already. It was frustrating not being able to find anything. At this rate, I'll be out on my ass by the time I got back from the trip (assuming Oruki actually decides to kick me out).

I decided to go downstairs to grab a drink. After walking into the kitchen and grabbing a soda, I noticed something odd in the living room. It was Naru-san, and she seemed to be staring out the window. I wasn't able to see her face from the angle I was standing, but it was obvious to me that her energy level was way lower than it usually was. I began to feel a bit concerned.

"Are you okay, Naru-san?"

Naru-san immediately turned her head towards me, looking a little surprised. She then put on her usual honey-sweet smile. "Oh, I'm fine Kyon-kun! Couldn't be better!"

I didn't buy it. She is after all a terrible liar. "Are you sure? You didn't look fine a second ago."

"It's nothing," said Naru-san as she tried to get herself up.

"Talk to me about it," I said. "If it's something that could make you stop smiling, it must be pretty bad."

Naru-san's smile slowly disappeared, almost as if she instantly knew I wouldn't believe her. She then sighed a bit and sat back down on the couch. She then leaned herself against the couch's armrest.

"You're right. I'm not really okay. I've been depressed ever since I made a realization this morning."

"What was that?" I asked as I took a seat on the couch next to her.

"I just realized that… well… my daughter recreated the world so that aliens, time-travelers and espers existed, right? If that's true, then that means that ghosts, spirits and demons don't exist in this world, since my daughter didn't shape the world so that they would exist."

"I see," I responded trying to think of something to comfort her. "What's wrong with aliens, time-travelers and espers?"

"Nothing. It's just that those are the things that interest Haru-chan. I was always more interested in the traditional occult stuff, while she was more into more new-age things. I've spent a very large part of my life trying to find ghosts and such, and now I feel like I've wasted my time. It's like a part of me has died… a little."

I wanted to say something in response, but I couldn't think of anything. The energy in the room appeared to have dropped into the negatives, and I was helpless to do anything other than listen.

Naru-san continued to speak her heart out. "When I was a girl, I used to delight in reading stories about famous haunted houses or buildings. Sometimes, I'd spend an entire day in a library reading about old European castles with supposedly ghostly dungeons, or I would read of huge, beautiful mansions that someone died in. Their spirit would still reside inside those places no matter what happened. I told myself that when I grew up that I would travel the world and visit those places to see for myself all the supernatural phenomenon that would reside there. For me, there was nothing more exciting than the nature of a person's soul. I wanted to find proof that it existed and that it lived forever after our bodies died."

"But then one day, I…" Naru-san paused for a bit, obviously trying to gather her thoughts. "… I found a different kind of book. This book, rather than telling me about different kinds of haunted houses, set out to debunk them. I was reluctant to read it at first, since it set out to try and ruin everything I believed in, but I ultimately convinced myself to read it. I thought that perhaps I would see through its lies

and say 'ha, but what about this? You can't disprove that!' But when I started to read it, I found out that many of the supposedly haunted houses that I had read about weren't actually so. Some of the houses had charlatans living in them that would fake supernatural events. Other houses merely had poor construction that resulted in strange noises that were the result of the house moving from the wind. The book also talked about the relative ease that people could be tricked into thinking something was there when it wasn't. Finally, it talked about haunted locations that in fact didn't even exist and were merely the fanciful creations of people who wanted to get attention. By the time I finished the book, I was devastated."

I couldn't help but have my heart go out to Naru-san. This was the first time I'd ever seen her this way. "So what happened after that?"

Naru-san smiled lightly at me, appearing appreciative of the fact that I was listening. "I was very depressed for about a year after that. I began to wonder if I'd just been a foolish girl my whole life believing in fairy tales and ghost stories. Reading that book caused a chain reaction in my thought process. I stopped believing at a lot of things that I thought were true. I gave up on childish things like Santa Clause, stopped believing in superstitions, and stopped looking at the supernatural as anything other than a bunch of silly stories or events that people either made up or misinterpreted. I guess you could say that I became a realist from that day onward. And yet… no matter how much more realistic my world-view became, I was always miserable. For whatever reason, I somehow needed to believe that the world was more interesting than it appeared to be on the surface."

Listening to Naru-san, I was reminded of the time when Haruhi had her epiphany at that baseball game all those years ago. I definitely could see the connection between the two. It's sad that the two of them don't talk more.

"At one point," continued Naru-san. "I realized that it wasn't enough for me to accept the world as it was. I had to find something supernatural. I had to see a ghost, spirit, demon or anything like that.

I knew in my head that I was being silly, but my heart was happy that I found purpose in my life again. I didn't care what other thought of me, I was going to find something. I told myself that one day I would visit those castles out in Europe, venture into every haunted mansion I could find, leave no stone unturned until I found what I was looking for, but… then I met my husband."

"What happened then?"

"My husband and I were still quite young when we met. It was a long story, but I guess you could say we were high school sweethearts. I'll never forget the first time I met him." She then stopped herself, perhaps a bit embarrassed about the details. "But that's not important, really. The truth is that when I met him, I would drag him around to all sorts of strange places against his will. I think at first he was anxious about being around me, but in time he was happy to come along on my excursions all over town. I knew he wasn't so much interested in ghosts and such as he was in spending time with me, but I was so happy that someone was willing to come along with me that it didn't matter. It took a long time, but eventually I realized that I was in love with him, and I was happy to find out that he felt the same. I had hoped that we would be able to search the whole world together when I was done with high school and college, but…"

Naru-san paused again as she briefly looked down at her stomach. She then rubbed it gently, almost nostalgically. "… I became pregnant with Haru-chan shortly after high school ended. I was then left with a very difficult decision. Was I going to put aside my aspirations so I could become a mother and wife? In the end, I did just that. I missed out on college, even though I had good enough grades to go, and I decided I would devote my life to supporting my husband and baby. I… don't regret my decision to do that, but sometimes I wonder what could have been." She then sighed deeply, staring at the ground. "Not that it matters. Now that I know that ghosts and stuff really aren't real, I at least know now that I didn't waste my time exploring the world for stuff that didn't exist. I should be happy that this world does have some interesting things in it, but

for some reason I can't. I… I just want the comfort of knowing that when I die, that everything that makes me… well… me won't just disappear. I don't want to not exist when I die."

I was still speechless. This was easily to most that Naru-san had ever spoken the entire time I'd known her. She'd always be so busy taking about others that she rarely said anything about herself. It was only now that I realized how selfless she was. She gave up so much to become a wife and mother. I personally think it was a great thing that she did that. After all, Naru-san was the glue that held the Suzumiya family together. She was the calming presence that tried to enliven her husband's and daughter's day in whatever way she could. I felt really bad for her. I knew I had to say something to make her feel better.

"Listen," I said, fumbling a bit with my words. "… I… uh… well, how can I say this? The truth is that when Haruhi remade the world, she only made it so that aliens, time-travelers and esper 'also' existed in it. It's still entirely possible that ghosts and stuff existed in the universe beforehand and still do now."

I noticed Naru-san head perk up when I said this. She blinked a couple times as I continued. "And who's to say that once Haruhi's out of the house and living on her own that you can't go back to school and do all the things that you've wanted to do. Hell, you're still only in your thirties, so you still have lots of time left in you life to go out and enjoy yourself. Go ahead and travel the world looking for whatever you want. You deserve it! Hell, I'm sure Haruhi might even be tempted to join you once in a while. We both know how much she likes adventure. And if your husband knows what's good for him, he better let you go, or I'll be the one to kick his ass." That last part was a joke, of course. There's no way I could ever hope to kick that man's ass.

Naru-san looked at me for a few more second before her eyes began to well up. Moments later, she began to cry. I was a bit concerned that she was upset, but her next words fixed that. "Oh Kyon-kun. You're just a wonderful young man. You're the only person

beside my husband and daughter that's ever understood me." She then gave me a big hug, burying her face in my shoulder. At first I felt a bit uncomfortable in this position, but when I remembered that both Haruhi and her father were out, I regained the courage to hug her back. And no, it was just an innocent hug, okay? There's no way I'd ever take advantage of a married woman, especially when I knew that her husband and daughter would murder me brutally if I ever did such a thing.

After a minute, Naru-san let go of me and sat back up. She began to wipe her eyes to remove the excess tears from her eyes before smiling again. "It's been a long time since I've had a friend. I know I can be a handful sometimes. I was considered the black sheep of my family. Most people just think that I'm a nut case and never talk to me. I'm so glad that you're not the type to judge people like that."

I scratched the back of my head and smiled. "Well, compared to the people I usually hang around with, you're a breath of fresh air." Naru-san and I had a good laugh after I said that.

It was then that Naru-san finally got up again. "Thank you, Kyon-kun. I feel much better now. From now on, I will consider you an official member of the Suzumiya family."

Uh… should I be thankful or scared?

"I'm going to go cook dinner now," said Naru-san. "I'll give it my all just for you." She gave me an innocent wink as she then frolicked into the kitchen.

Feeling pretty good about myself, I got up and headed back up the stairs. However, I was back to thinking about the fact that the newspaper classifieds were not helping me in my search for places to live. This was a bit disconcerting. If the newspaper wasn't helping me find a place, where else could I look? It was then that I came up with an idea. Why not look it up in the web? Hell, using newspapers is old-fashioned, anyway. Most people post stuff online this day and age. There was only one problem…

… the only computer in the house was in Haruhi's room.

Crap. Decision time. Haruhi's already told me that I wasn't allowed in her room without permission, and I definitely wasn't allowed to touch her computer. Then again, I knew she was likely to still be out for a little while, and if I only used her computer to look for a place to live and nothing else, there would be no harm done. Oruki was out, and Naru-san was busy in the kitchen, so there was little chance of me being caught. Then again, I could just wait until Haruhi got back and asked her if I could use her computer, but I knew she'd likely deny my request. I honestly don't think she wants me to find a place of my own. She proved that when she sabotaged my efforts to find a place a couple weeks ago. I could wait until I'm back in school and use the computer there, but then again, if I wait until Monday to start looking, I probably wasn't going to have the time to go see the places. Not to mention the fact that Haruhi was likely to have me busy all week preparing for the trip to Kyoto. Dammit, what do I do? Should I go for it? Or not?

I'm in Haruhi's room, booting up her computer. Her computer was actually a piece of crap compared to the one we had in our classroom, likely something she's had for quite sometime. As a result, it was incredibly slow to load compared to most of the other computers I've used. After what seemed like forever (or actually five minutes) I found myself face to face with the log in screen, asking for my password. Crap! Haruhi has a password on this thing?! Give me a break! What could she be hiding on this thing that she didn't want others to find? Was she trying to make sure her parents weren't able to look through her computer? To be honest, I somehow doubted that either of them were computer savvy enough to know where to find all the bad stuff in her computer. Hell, Oruki still relied on newspapers, which are quickly becoming outdated.

Anyway, I was now stuck at the log in screen, and I had no idea what her password was. I took my first stab at it and typed in "SOS Brigade." Nope. Next, I tried typing in her name. Nope. I typed in my

name and my nickname. Nope and nope. Eventually, I found myself becoming frustrated. What the hell was the damn password? Think! If I was a whacked-out teenage girl with an obsession with aliens, time-travelers and espers, what password would I use?

I went and typed in a few more guesses, but they came out wrong, too. Dammit, why can't I figure this out? I leaned back into Haruhi's chair and probed the depths of my mind. The answer was there somewhere. I knew it! I tried to think about everything I knew about her. I looked up at the ceiling and remembering how the paintings on it reminded me of the time nearly four years ago I helped a very young Haruhi draw those weird marking on the school lawn on… that's it!

I immediately sat up and typed in the word "Tanabata" in as the password. Success! I can't believe I figured it out. How scary is it that I knew her so well that I could literally guess her passwords. That couldn't be healthy.

When the desktop finally loaded, I was greeted with the image of the SOS Brigade's very own tapeworm logo… thing. It figured that Haruhi would actually think that something as hideous as that thing would make a decent desktop wallpaper. Trying to ignore the image, I went and opened up the web browser. To my complete lack of surprise, the home page for her web browser was the SOS Brigade's very own (and very lame) website. I'll admit that I was less than enthused to see the horrible excuse for a web page once again. Trying to ignore that too, I went and typed up the web address to a search engine. After that, I began my earnest search of places to move into.

At first, I was frustrated with a lack of success, since most of the classifieds online were for places in the major cities. It took a while, but eventually I managed to find a website that allowed me to narrow my search to the local area. Once I did that, I began the arduous task of reading through every ad that I could find. Much like the newspaper classifieds, most of the places were way too expensive for me to be able to move in. There were also a few places on there

that I was sure I'd seen on the newspaper, too. Eventually, I started to lose hope that I'd find anything until I spotted one that really caught my attention…

Looking for a roommate! My last roommate moved out to live with his girlfriend, so I need someone to move in with me to help pay for the rent. I'm only asking for 35,000 yen a month. The apartment complex has its own pool and gaming room. Very nice place to live with very friendly neighbors!

I couldn't believe my luck. This place sounded perfect, and the best part was that it was close to where I used to live, so I would already be familiar with the neighborhood. Plus, if the place had its own pool, then maybe that could mean that I could look out the window and ogle any of the beautiful girls that would go swimming there. That would be awesome. No doubt that Haruhi and the rest of the Brigade would likely visit often to take advantage of the pool and gaming room whenever possible, which was fine by me as long as she stayed out of trouble. I excitedly wrote down the address and any other information I figured I would need and stuffed it in my pocket. After that, I continued to look around for any other places I could find, but I couldn't find anymore. Oh well, I guess I'll have to bank on this one place. Hopefully it's everything I want it to be.

I eventually closed down the web browser, knowing that I was finished with whatever I planned on doing. The smart thing would have been to shut the computer down right there and then, but the smart part of my brain must've been struck unconscious by Mjolnir, because I found myself increasingly tempted to dig around in Haruhi's computer. Haruhi wanted me away from her computer for a reason, and I was sure that if I looked around I'd find that reason.

The first place I looked was the "My Documents" folder. Inside of there I was surprised to find it filled with only text documents, all of them labeled with a date. The very first one was dated in April of last year… Hey, it was the first day of high school, wasn't it? I clicked on the document to take a look at it. It read like this:

Today was the first day of school at North High. So far it's been completely boring. I introduced myself by saying that only aliens, time-travelers, sliders or espers would be allowed to talk to me. Since one no approached me, I could only assume that everyone was a dull, pathetic, ordinary human. It better not have been a mistake to go to this school. Anyway, tomorrow I'm going to look into the clubs that are available at the school like I promised to dad. Hoping at least one of them would be interesting. I'd rather not have to bother, but I don't want to have my idiot father riding my ass about it. Anyway, that's all I feel like talking about. Bye.

I couldn't believe it. I just struck freaking gold! I found a jackpot of all sorts of juicy tidbits in the form of an electronic diary. There appeared to be dozens and dozens of entries, possibly more than a hundred. This was actually my chance to perhaps really get to learn for myself how that girl's brain worked. The temptation was now far too great. I had to look at another. The next one I picked was about a month after the first one, since I knew I didn't have time to read through every one of them.

Still bored as hell. I'm starting to think it was a mistake to go to this school. I tried out of the rock club. It was boring, too. What a waste of time. The only thing even remotely worth mentioning was this guy I talked with a bit who sits in front of me in class. I can't remember his name, but everyone calls him Kyon. He asked me a question about my hair, and for some reason I felt like answering him. He looked familiar, but it's probably just me. I'm pretty sure he's nothing more than an ordinary human, though. Well, I'm getting my hair cut today. It was getting to be too much of a hassle messing with it every morning. Not much else to say, so I'll talk later.

It figured that Haruhi wouldn't remember my real name. Heck, I wasn't even sure she knew my real name now. Anyway, I decided to pick one from a couple weeks later.

I JUST HAD THE GREATEST IDEA!!! I can't believe I wasted so much time in all those stupid clubs where I could've made my own this whole time! I got the idea when I was listening to that idiot Kyon

go on some tirade about how we should let geniuses make the innovations of the world. At first I was like "Are you saying I'm not a genius?" and I was getting a bit pissed off, but when I thought about it, I realized that if I was as smart as I thought I was, shouldn't I be the one innovating? And then it hit me! I'm so excited! I can't wait to get my club started! I already got that idiot to help me out with it. Not sure what the club will be about, but whatever. I'll figure that out later! Talk to you later! Bye!

I'll never forget that day. I was finding all these diary entries incredibly interesting to read. Just as I thought, reading these really was like looking into a window into Haruhi's head. The next one I picked was more than a week later.

Sooooo booooooorrrrrrreeeeeed! I got this club together, but nothing's really happening. I got a cute mascot and a mysterious transfer student, but still nothing. I was really hoping that with all five of us that there would be something interesting that would happen, but… nothing. When I found out that Asakura girl disappeared, I tried to go and investigate it, but I wasn't able to find anything. Really, though, what's been bothering me the most is Kyon. For some reason, I keep thinking about him. I don't know why, but I feel better when he's around. There must be something wrong with me. I mean, he's not really anything special. He's just some average, ordinary guy. He's not even as good looking as the transfer student. Maybe I'm tired or something. I'm going to bed. Maybe something interesting will finally happen.

Strangely enough, there was another entry made on what appeared to be the same day. I decided to read that, too.

I know I should be in bed right now, but I can't sleep. I had the freakiest dream last night. I was at the school and the whole world was grey. I couldn't leave the school, either, because there was some weird barrier around it. That wasn't even the weirdest part. Kyon was there with me. Anyway, we searched the school to find help or a way out, but there was nothing we could do. After a while, these blue giant things appeared. It was so amazing! They were the

most awesome things I'd ever seen. I wanted to keep watching, but Kyon grabbed me and ran out of the school and out into the field. He kept saying something about wanting to go back, but I wanted to stay. I hard to explain but for some reason, I was so incredibly happy. Seeing those giants, I was drawn to them, but Kyon wasn't. For some reason, he didn't want to be there. At first, I was really upset that he didn't want to stay there with me, but then it happened. He told me something about him liking me wearing a pony tail and then he kissed me. And for some reason, I liked it. I'd completely forgotten about the world around me and was absorbed into his lips. It felt so real that I was almost sure it was actually happening. I then woke up on the floor. I had no idea how I managed to fall off the bed like that. All I could think about was how vivid that dream was and… why did I like that kiss so much? Am I… I don't know. Anyway, I had hoped that writing this out would help me get some sleep. I'm so restless right now. I'm going to try to go back to bed, but I doubt I'll succeed. Night.

That was the first time Haruhi and I had kissed, and a lot had changed since then, including Haruhi herself. The memories of that night had faded a bit, but I could still remember that last moment with surprising clarity. I tried not to, though, since every time I did, this uncomfortable sensation kept up in my head. It appeared that perhaps this was the moment Haruhi finally started to realize her feelings for me.

For the next hour, I continued to skim through the various diary entrees, seeing her reactions to each of the different events that the Brigade was involved in, including the baseball tournament, the trip to the private island, the times we had during that infamous last two weeks of summer, the cultural festival when we made the movie, and so much more. By the time the entries got to November, she was no longer in denial about her feelings for me, but she kept insisting to herself that it was best not to push the matter, stating that it would likely ruin things in the long run. One of the more emotional entries came during the day I flipped out at her during the time we were filming the movie. She was wondering if I hated her now and if our

friendship was ruined. She was pretty distraught and appeared genuinely sorry for the way she treated Asahina-san that day.

Another very emotional entry came the day after I returned from the hospital in December. She went on about how easily we all took life for granted and how she'd have to make sure that nothing like that ever happened to me again. I continued on with the entries until I came up to the more recent ones. The next one here was on Tuesday of the week I found out my family was moving.

Today was another typical day, which kinda sucked. It's been too long since the Brigade's done something big. I've been trying to think up ideas for us to do, but I'm a bit stumped for now. I already know what I want to do for Tanabata, but that's two months from now. We need to find something to do in the mean time. Kyon was acting a bit weird today. He told me he couldn't sleep last night. I was on cleaning duty today, and when I was finished I was surprised to find that Kyon and Koizumi-kun were out of the club room. When they came back, Kyon insisted it was only boy stuff they were talking about. I can't help but get the feeling that something was wrong. He's hiding something. Whatever, maybe it's nothing. I talk again later. Bye!

I regretted not telling Haruhi the truth sooner. I was being an idiot then. I noticed an entry made the very next day, so I decided to read that one, knowing it was likely her reaction to the fact that I was moving.

I knew it! Something bad did happen to Kyon! Or at least will happen. I had to threaten him to get him to talk, but it turns out that he's moving. Yes, you heard me. MOVING! I not even sure how to react. I don't think it's really hit home yet. I mean, I know what this means, but I can't help but feel like it must be a joke or something. He's moving… He's really going away, isn't he? There has to be something I can do. I can't let such an important member of the Brigade leave. Actually, he's more than just a Brigade member to me. I think it's starting to sink in now. I'm starting to feel depressed. I'm going to go now. I'm losing the will to write. Bye.

She didn't bother to write another entry until the night before I was supposed to leave, right after the end of the party.

So, this is it. Tonight was the last night we spent together before he leaves. I feel sick inside. I… I wanted to tell him how I really felt about him, but I couldn't. He tells me that he'll visit, but I'm certain he was just trying to make me feel better. He's gone now. I don't know what to do. I can't stop crying. This sucks so bad. Should I go to his place tomorrow morning and see him off? Maybe I can tell him then how I really feel. I can't let him go like this. I just…

The entry stops abruptly here before the tone of it changes dramatically.

… *THAT BASTARD!!! How could he possibly put me through such turmoil?! Guess what! Apparently he's not moving after all! Can you believe it?! After all the effort I went through to throw a party for him and help him pack, it's all for nothing! He's so getting a piece of my mind when I see him tomorrow! Anyway, I told him to meet up with the Brigade tomorrow morning. I have to call the others and let them know. I'll talk later. Bye!*

I couldn't help but laugh at that part. It was so typical of Haruhi. She wouldn't even admit to her diary that she was happy that I wasn't moving. Knowing that the next entry was both the day after and the first day I moved in with Haruhi, I read that one next.

Okay, you'll never guess who's currently sleeping in the guest room right now. It's him! I convinced Kyon to move in with me. He needed a place to live for the time being so I offered my place. The hard part was convincing my dad to let him stay. I was going to ask him ahead of time, but then I realized that I'd have more success if I brought Kyon here first. It's harder to say no to someone when you see them face to face. And with a little help from mom, I was able to convince him to let Kyon live here! He can only stay a month, and he needs to find a place of hid own, but that's fine with me! It sucks that he's sleeping, though. That's all he's done since he got here. Well, I guess I can't blame him. I'm pretty sure he hasn't slept very well this

*week, and to be honest, neither have I. *yawn* I think I'm going to go to bed, too. We have school tomorrow. I bet that idiot hasn't done his homework. Anyway, talk later. Bye!*

So that was the reason why Haruhi didn't tell her parents until I got there. I had to admit that it was pretty crafty of her to do that. There were a lot of entries for that week, but I decided to skip to the one that was written on Saturday of that week. It was a long one.

Today was a weird day. I was supposed to go with Kyon to look at apartments with him. I knew that he's supposed to eventually find a place of his own, but I didn't really want him to leave. At the very least, I figured the place he moved into had to be pretty damn nice for me to allow him to move in. Anyway, I was a bit relieved to find that none of the places were good enough, except for the last one, but Kyon didn't have enough to money to move in. But then we ran into Tsuruya and Mikuru-chan. Well, I already told you that I suspected that Kyon liked Tsuruya. I mean, he did say that he'd pick her if he had to be on a deserted island. That's practically a confession, isn't it? Anyway, I got pretty moody being around her, especially when she started teasing me about why I shave my legs. It's none of her damn business why I shave my legs!

Well, I took my moodiness out on Kyon and we got into an argument. He then accused me of being jealous of Tsuruya, and I got mad and stormed off. Thinking about it now, I was acting kinda dumb, and I guess I was jealous. I'd never admit that to anyone, though. Anyway, when I had time to cool off, I started to worry that Kyon was mad at me. I wasn't really sure what to do, though. I thought about apologizing, but I was so sure that he would make fun of me about it. I even rehearsed it in my head and everything. Well after dinner, we were cleaning up and… well, Kyon actually thanked me for helping him. When I heard him say that, I was really relieved to know he wasn't mad at me. It was then that I decided to apologize. It was really hard for me to do that. I keep feeling like only weak people should do that. And I was so sure that Kyon would see my weakness

and take advantage of it, but I was wrong. He just smiled at me and accepted my apology.

*I was almost floored. I was so sure that he was going to tease me about it. It felt really good to know that things were okay between us. And that smile he gave…*sigh* Anyway, after I figure things were okay between us, I decided to let Kyon in on my battle plan against James Randi, but when I opened then door to his room, I found him looking at a girly magazine. He tried to hide it, but I got a hold of it and started looking through it. /I found myself getting jealous again, since the girls in the magazine were beautiful. I kept thinking about which one he liked the most. I kept asking him about the girls in the magazine, and he was like "Why do you want to know what I think about these girls?" I couldn't tell him the truth, so I made up some bull crap. He then told me that he needed some kind of release and stuff since he didn't have a girlfriend. So I asked him if he wanted one. He tried to avoid answering the question, but I could tell that he did. I started teasing him a bit about it, hoping he would tell me who he wanted to go out with, but he didn't say. I want to know! Would he ever consider going out with me? I shouldn't think like that. I said before that the two of us dating was a bad idea for a lot of reasons, but I can't stop thinking about him. I want to pull my hair out!*

I'll be right back. I want to look at him while he's sleeping. I won't be long.

I facepalmed at this moment. I knew exactly what happened next. That damn kiss. Our second one to be exact. The memories of it came flooding back. The warmth, the softness, the taste. Dammit, why was it that this kiss felt so different from the first one. Was it because she kissed me? Or maybe it was because my feeling towards her had changed since the first time. I didn't know. All I knew was that there was a part of me that wanted to experience it again. No! Stop thinking that! Go away, stupid thoughts! I decided to finish the rest of the entry.

OMG, what have I done?! Why the hell did I do that?! I kissed him! And not a regular kiss, either! I don't know why, but when I was

looking at him sleeping, I just felt the need to kiss him. And it felt soooooooooo good! I'm so glad he didn't wake up, but… he actually kissed back. I was scared at first, but when I realized he wasn't awake, I kept kissing. I bet he thought he was dreaming. I wonder who he thought he was kissing. Wow, what a day. I need to lie down. I doubt I'll be able to sleep, though. I just hope he doesn't realize it was me. Anyway, I got a lot to do tomorrow, so good night!

If only she knew. She'd probably die from embarrassment. This was just too good. I skipped over the Sunday entry and went for Mondays, knowing exactly what happened on that day. I knew the entry was not going to be a positive one.

This is this worst day of my life. It's gone! The SOS Brigade! My parents found out about it, and my ass$%# of a father said I wasn't allowed to go to it anymore. When Kyon and I came home, my father bullied Kyon into spilling the beans. Now, everything's ruined. I can't believe Kyon could be such an idiot. He fell right into my father's hands. For the last year, I told my parents I was in the Literary Club because I knew my dad would never accept the SOS Brigade. I should have known that he'd find out about it eventually. I hate my father! I hate him! I hate this stupid world! Maybe it would just be better if… be right back. Something's happening outside…

I can't believe it. Kyon got into a fight with my dad. Kyon actually went and stood up for the Brigade… or maybe it was for me. I take back every bad thing I've ever said about him. He's the most wonderful guy I've ever met. I mean, my dad kicked the crap out of him, and he still kept getting up. He was so awesome! Well, I guess it would've been more awesome if he could've won, but still. God, I love him! I feel a little better now. I'm still upset, though. My father said he'd talk to us later about the Brigade, so I'm not sure what's going to happen to it. I feel bad for Kyon, too. He's going to get a black eye for sure. It looked really painful. Anyway, I can't think of anything else to say. I'm really depressed about everything else. I really hope I won't lose the Brigade. It means the world to me.

Seeing the words "I love him" on the screen and knowing that she was referring to me made my heart skip. I could feel my self growing increasingly anxious. I began to imagine her saying the words "I love you" to me directly, her eyes shimmering innocently. I felt my face becoming warmer again. I had to move on to another one. I was getting a bit overwhelmed.

The one I picked just happened to be the one from last Sunday. I remembered what happened that day. Breaking into school, spending money I didn't have, the fight with Haruhi, the horrible dream, the dinner we had, and then what happened on the roof top. I read the entire entry all to way to the point where I decided to go to bed. The entry there said this:

When I watched Kyon begin to walk away towards the window, I felt this incredibly strong compulsion hit me. I felt myself getting caught up in the moment. The dinner we had together and the time we spent on the roof talking, it was really romantic. At least it felt that way to me. I was so happy to be with him like this, I knew I just had to say something. I called out to him. I wanted to desperately tell him how I really felt. I wanted to tell him "I love you" so bad. But I didn't. I got scared and held back.

Why am I so afraid to tell him? I kept trying to rationalize it by saying it would ruin our friendship, but I know now that I can't keep this up anymore. At first it was enough just to be his friend, but my feelings have grown too strong. I desire so much more, and I can't settle for just being his friend anymore. But I'm scared. There's a small part of me that's worried that he'll reject me. I'm such a hypocrite. I remember I used to mock the guys I'd gone on dates with for confessing to me on the phone, and here I am acting just like them. I just don't know what to do. I can usually read Kyon's thoughts pretty easily, but I'm never able to read how he feels about me. Was it a mistake to hold back? I wish I knew. The only thing I know now is that sooner or later, I'm going to tell him how I really feel. I just don't know when.

I was right. Haruhi was going to confess to me. I felt myself becoming weak from reading that. The thought of her confessing to me scared the crap out of me. Why? Because I had no idea what I would say if she did. Do I love her? I couldn't say. By brain was in constant conflict with itself. The answer was eluding me, and I wasn't sure why.

There were only a few more entries left, so I looked at the last one. Over all, I would say that I was quite surprised with how normal Haruhi's thoughts really were. I guess Koizumi was right that on the inside that she was a rational human being and wasn't crazy. Anyway, the last entry said this:

Well, tomorrow's the big day! I never thought I'd ever participate in a mud wrestling contest. It sounds like it's going to be a lot of fun. I also can't wait to see Kyon wrestle. I'm actually really curious as to what he'll look like in a Speedo! He he he! I just hope the turn out is high. We need the money bad.

Well, I've also made a decision. Now that I think about it, I'm really glad I didn't tell Kyon how I felt the other night. A confession is a big deal and the moment has to be just right. I should not fall victim to my compulsions. Instead, I must pick a moment that's as romantic as possible. That's why I've decided on the perfect time and place to do it. I've already planned it out. I'm going to…

Before I could finish reading, I heard someone coming up the steps. CRAP! In a panic, I did a hard shutdown of the computer and opened the window. I quickly climbed out of the window and onto the roof. Just as I got up there, I heard the door open. I peeked my head over the edge of the roof to see if I was in the clear. There was one major problem. The window was open. I was worried that Haruhi might notice that it was open and get suspicious. My concerns were justified when I saw Haruhi's head pop out of the window, looking around. I immediately moved away from the edge of the roof and tried to carefully crawl away to the other side of the roof, but I slipped a bit and my knee hit the roof, creating a rather loud thud. Without a

doubt Haruhi heard that, and my worst fears were confirmed again when I saw her hand grab the edge of the roof.

I moved as quickly as I could to the other side of the roof, hoping beyond hope that I could find a way down on the other side. To my chagrin, when I got to the edge of the roof on that side, there was no way down. I squatted down and closed my eyes, begging the gods that Haruhi wouldn't climb over to the other side of the roof and find me there.

The gods have forsaken me…

I heard Haruhi moving closer and closer to me, until she was right next to me. I slowly opened my eyes and looked up at her. It wasn't Haruhi. Instead, it was a demon that happened to take the shape of Haruhi. She stared down at me with vileness so great that I could feel my skin trying to run away. I swore for a second that her eyes turned red.

"What were you doing in my room?"

Never in my whole life had I been asked such a scary question. She asked that question calmly, but there was a hint of rage in it, like she was a pot of water only seconds away from boiling over. I stupidly tried to lie. "I… wanted to get some fresh air so I went up to the roof."

"Wrong answer!" screamed Haruhi as she grabbed me by my collar and lifted me up. I wasn't sure, but I thought she might have been so angry that her strength must have doubled, even tripled. "How many times have I told you that you were not allowed in my room without permission?!"

I swallowed hard, unable to answer right away. Her rage had grown so much that she was literally… grinning. Her expression reminded me of the time she accidentally found that confession letter to Nagato and thought it was from me. It was like her brain forgot that you're not supposed to be smiling when you're angry.

"Now tell me, what were you doing in my room?!"

"Using your computer…" I said meekly.

Haruhi slammed me down onto the roof shingles. "Bastard! I specifically told you that you're never, EVER allowed to touch my computer! How dare you defy your Chief this way?!" I could see her right eye twitching as she looked like she was about to beat the living day lights out of me.

"I was just using it to look for places to live online! Honest!" That was technically the truth, even though it wasn't the whole truth.

"Liar!"

"No, I can prove it!" I said as I pulled out the piece of paper from my pocket.

Haruhi snatched it from me and began to read it. She blinked for a second before her eyes widened. "Wait a minute! How did you know my password?!"

"I guessed," I said as I rubbed the back of my neck. "I remembered how important Tanabata was to you and though maybe that was it."

Haruhi calmed down a tad upon hearing this, perhaps a bit happy to know I remembered that. She was still pretty peeved, though. "Whatever! The fact of the matter is that you didn't ask for permission to use my computer, and that's a violation of a direct order! I can't believe you didn't even ask!"

"I didn't ask because I knew you'd say no," I responded.

"So how does that make it okay to sneak into my room and use my computer?!"

"Look, I didn't see anything if you're worried." Blatant, blatant lie.

Haruhi merely grunted before she crumpled up the paper in her hand and threw it at me. Fortunately, I was able to catch it. However, Haruhi started to walk away towards her window. I was surprised that she didn't issue a penalty or punishment of some kind, but upon realizing that, I suddenly became even more afraid. "Uh… Haruhi?"

She didn't answer me. She kept walking towards the corner, and when she reached the edge, she started to climb down.

"Haruhi, wait!" I ran up to the corner to follow her. But when I got there, Haruhi had already climbed back into her room and closed the window. I then saw her lock it. "Hey, Haruhi! Haruhi!"

Crap! She left me up on the roof! How the hell am I going to get down now? Just as I said that to myself, I felt a droplet of water hit me hand. I looked up to see the sky turning into a darkened grey color. Moments later, it started to rain like crazy. The sky was completely clear only minutes ago, without a cloud in the sky. Without a doubt, these clouds were the manifestation of Haruhi. Now was stuck on the roof, becoming completely soaked as the rain continued to pour on me. I swear if I catch pneumonia I will so cough on Haruhi to get her sick.

About a half hour later, I saw Oruki come back in his car. After he parked in the driveway and got out, I began to yell down to him for help.

Oruki looked up at me for a few seconds, shook his head and went inside.

Hey you bastard! Come back! Damn you Oruki! I swear I'll make you pay!

It was only after the rain stopped that Oruki finally brought the ladder out and helped me get down. He asked me how I got up there, and I merely answered "Haruhi." Oruki dropped the question after I said that. I was glad he did, because I didn't want to tell him about how his daughter liked to go up onto the roof a lot.

Dinner was extra delicious today, just like how Naru-san promised. Haruhi didn't talk to me for the rest of the night, but I wasn't too bothered with that. I knew she'd get over it soon enough. What did bother me was what the last diary entry said. Haruhi not only knew she was going to eventually confess, she even had a time and place picked out. This made me extremely nervous. For all I knew, it could have been tomorrow. It wasn't likely, but I couldn't be sure. I cursed my luck that Haruhi came back just as I was about to find out when and where it was. Actually, I already had a sneaking suspicion that I knew when and where it was really going to happen…

… I began to look at this trip to Kyoto with more dread than ever before…

Ooo, more foreshadowing. Hehehehehe.

This chapter was a lot longer than I thought it would be, but it was a lot of fun to write. I hope you guys enjoyed it!

Chapter 22

As always, thank you once again for all your support. Your support makes this writing experience all the more fun.

BTW in Japan, "kissing cousins" is not as taboo as it is in many western countries and cultures. In the books, Kyon admitted to having a crush on one of his cousins when he was younger. If you think that's gross, I ask that you try not to judge by you own standards of what's okay. In many cultures, it's acceptable to marry a cousin. Oh, and "itoko" means "cousin" in Japan.

The beginning of this chapter references Valentine's Day and White Day in Japan. If you don't know anything about those holidays, I suggest you look them up. The Japanese version of Valentine's Day is a bit different from the American version.

Anyway as always, please enjoy the chapter.

Chapter 22

I once again had another strange dream. Actually, it was more like reliving a memory. I was a child again, and I was running through a field with my older cousin, the very same one who was the first girl I'd ever fallen for. The field we were in was the property of one of my uncles. I remember being there many times as a kid. They were some of the best memories of my life.

Anyway, the two of us eventually made our way towards a nearby pond. My cousin picked up a flat rock and skipped it across the water. It bounced off the water three times before it finally sunk. I tried to do that same, but the rock I used was large and round. It hit the water with a loud splash. I tried again with a smaller rock, but I was still unsuccessful.

I soon heard my cousin giggle at me. "Silly, you're doing it wrong." She then picked a nice, flat stone and put it in my hand. "Try this one." She then moved my fingers in the correct position to properly skip the rock. I remembered the feel of her hands. So soft.

"There. Now try again."

I complied and threw the rock as best I could. It managed to bounce once before sinking into the pond. At least it was an improvement. The two of us continued to do this for several more minutes, trying to beat our own personal best records for the number of skips. The best I could do was two skips compared to my cousin's five. I remembered feeling very disappointed.

The dream moved onto a scene a couple years later. It was Valentine's Day, and I was over at my cousin's house again. She was baby sitting me and my sister for my parents, who apparently wanted to have a nice evening together that night. I was sitting in the living room playing video games, trying to stave off boredom. It was then that my cousin stood at the entrance to the living room, obviously holding something behind her back.

"I got a surprise for you, Itoko-chan!"

I'd completely forgotten that it was Valentine's Day, so I had no idea what she had to give me. I paused the game and got up to see what she was going to give me. "What do you got?"

"Close you eyes and hold out your hand," she said sweetly.

Not sure if I should trust her, I closed my eyes reluctantly and held out my hand. I then felt something put onto my hand. I opened my eyes and found a box that had chocolate inside.

"I heard that you've never gotten a chocolate for Valentine's Day before, so I wanted to be the first."

I excitedly opened the box and pulled out a large, heart-shaped, chocolate candy. "Alright! A honmei-choco!"

My cousin laughed heartily. "Silly Itoko-chan! It's giri-choco."

I felt mildly disappointed to hear that it wasn't honmei-choco, but I tried not to show it. When I looked into her eyes, I swore at the time that she was the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen. I think that was the moment I truly fell for her. It was too bad that the moment was ruined by my sister entering the room and begging me to give her some of my chocolate.

The scene then moved onto March 14th, a month later. It was White Day, and I was determined to get something for my cousin in return. All month, I saved up my allowance so that I could buy the biggest and most expensive bouquet of flowers I could get. When I left the flower shop, I remembered feeling extremely anxious. I couldn't wait to give her the flowers. My mind raced with all different kinds of scenarios, all of which ended with the two of us kissing. Unfortunately, the moment I exited the flower shop, I noticed that it was starting to rain. I panicked and jumped onto my bike as soon as I could. I had to make it to my cousin's house as soon as I could before the rain ruined the bouquet.

I pushed myself harder on my bike than I'd ever pushed myself. I'd never been much of an athlete, and this was especially true when I was a kid. The rain was pouring really hard now, and I was quickly getting soaked. I didn't care. All that mattered to me was getting these flowers to my cousin. My destiny awaited me.

When I finally made it to my cousin's house, I immediately jumped off my bike, ignoring my lungs desperate plea for more oxygen. I grabbed the bouquet of flowers, which were now sopping wet and were sagging a bit to one side. I bolted towards the front door as fast as I could and knock as hard as I could. Seconds later, my aunt (the same one that would later give me my infamous nickname) answered the door. She let me in, and I immediately kicked off my shoes before darting straight for my cousin's room.

"I'm here to give you your gift!" I yelled as I approached the door to her room. Just as I reached the door to her room, I heard laughing and giggling from inside. I wasn't bothered by this until I heard the voice of what was obviously a guy. My heart jumped into my throat. I slowly opened the door to her room as quietly as I could.

What I saw inside would cause me the most despair I'd ever experienced in my entire life. Inside, I saw my cousin lying on her bed next to some other guy I'd never met before. The two of them were looking into each other's eyes lovingly.

"Are you ready for your White Day present?" the guy asked.

"Sure," said my cousin elatedly.

The guy pulled out a small box from his pocket and handed it to her. She opened it to find a pair of beautiful matching earrings. "They're beautiful!"

"I've been saving my money all month to get you that," said the guy.

"Thank you," said my cousin affectionately.

I then watched as the two of them slowly came together and kissed. I felt like I was dying inside as I watched this happen. I dropped the flowers on the ground and began to walk away. I couldn't watch another second of it. I had to get as far away from her as I could.

I wasn't sure, but I must've been crying when I ran out the door, because I remember my aunt asking me if I was alright. I didn't answer her. I simply put my shoes back on and dashed out the door back into the rain. Before long, I was on my bike again and racing towards home as fast as I could go.

Without knowing it, my cousin had just ripped out my heart and stomped all over it. The heartache I felt was agonizing. Never in my whole of have I ever been more miserable. The rain was coming down so hard that the road had become incredibly slippery.

Eventually, I hit a large rock in that was in the middle of the bike trail, and I lost control. I then fell off my bike and landed on the hard asphalt, tumbling a bit before coming to a stop. My body was pretty banged up from the fall, but even then the pain in my body couldn't compare to the pain in my heart. I remember not moving from that spot until the rain finally stopped. I simply didn't have the strength of will to do it.

I then woke up… and sighed deeply, relieved to be back in the present. It's been a long time since I last dreamt about my cousin. It's been quite a long time since I last saw her, too. Last I heard, she was still with that deadbeat. Not that I'm hung up over it anymore. She could have him for all I cared.

I sat up and gave a huge yawn. I then looked at my clock. Five minutes to seven. Hey, I woke up a little early. Well, having a bad dream could do that. I was just starting to rub out the crust from the corners of my eyes when I heard my door slowly open. I didn't bother to turn towards the door since I already knew who it was.

"Too bad, Haruhi. I'm already u-" I wasn't able to finish my sentence before I felt something jab into my neck. A familiar twitching pain could be felt, which forced me to jump back away from it. "Ow! What the hell?!"

Haruhi stood there with a smug grin on her face while she twirled around a pen in her hand. Wait, when did she get that thing back? "I bought another one yesterday. They're not that expensive, you know."

Great. Just great. So what she's really telling me is that no matter what I do, she'll always be able to just go and buy another trick pen and use it against me. That's so not fair. "Why the hell did you shock me anyway? I was awake."

Haruhi pointed the button of the pen a centimeter away from my face before answering. "I just wanted to let you know that I haven't forgotten about what you did yesterday, Kyon!"

Yes, yes, I get it! Now can you get out now so I can get dressed?

Haruhi merely gave an annoyed grunt and began to make her way towards the door. "We're having a city-wide search today, so you better get ready fast!"

After nodding and watching Haruhi leave my room, I went and got myself washed up and dressed. When I made my way down into the kitchen, I found that both of Haruhi's parents were already in the kitchen. Naru-san was happily making breakfast while Oruki was once again reading his newspaper. After I cheerfully greeted the both of them, I went into the refrigerator to pour myself a glass of milk.

"Oh, Kyon-kun!" said Naru-san. "Before I forget, you got a letter in the mail yesterday. I think it's from your mother." She then pointed to a letter lying on the counter.

"Oh, great!" I said as I excitedly grabbed the letter and opened it. I read the letter inside, feeling good to know that my mother was thinking of me and was glad I was doing okay. More importantly, there was actually 50,000 yen inside, much to my surprise. Apparently, my father got a pretty good pay raise up north, and my mother was able to send a little extra money. With this, I now had a total of 90,000 yen, which should definitely be enough to find a place of my own and even have some money left over. Needless to say that this definitely improved my mood.

Of course, there was someone that had to ruin the moment. "Got some money, huh? Good, now you can pay me what you owe for rent."

I turned to Oruki and sighed a bit. It figured he was going to bring that up now. Guess I couldn't blame him. I did still technically owe him. "How much?"

He raised an eyebrow at me and then shook his head disappointingly. "I was kidding. I told you already that I wasn't going to ask until you had a place of your own."

"Oh," said as I lightly chuckled. Who would've thought that Oruki had a sense of humor?

"So when the hell are you leaving?" asked Oruki as he turned a page in his newspaper. "I'm getting sick of you eating all my food."

"I had a place I wanted to look at today," I said as I took a swig of my milk.

"You do realize that your month is almost up, right?" asked Oruki.

"Don't worry," I said with an assuring tone. "I have a good feeling about this place I'm checking out."

"Do you now. Have you talked to manager of the place?"

I shook my head. "It's someone looking for a roommate. They're only asking for 35,000 yen a month, and in the ad they said that the apartment complex had a swimming pool and a game room."

"Ooo that sounds great!" said Naru-san cheerfully. "And so cheap."

Oruki didn't seem so enthusiastic. "Yeah, too cheap."

When I heard Oruki say that, I had to admit that my level of concern rose a bit. "Well, I'll find out what's going on when I go there."

"You should try calling them first," suggested Oruki just as Haruhi entered the kitchen.

"Sooooo hungry!" exclaimed Haruhi as she took a seat at the table.

"Breakfast will be right up, Haru-chan!" spoke her mother with a sweetness that rivaled the richest honey.

"You're right," I said to Oruki as I walked out of the kitchen. "I should call."

"Don't be long, Kyon!" yelled Haruhi. "We need to finish breakfast as soon as possible so we can meet up with the rest of the Brigade!"

"Alright," I said as I made my way upstairs and into my room. I grabbed my cellphone and the paper with the number on it (it still had all the creases from when Haruhi crumpled it up yesterday). I dialed the number and listened in, hoping someone would answer. Unfortunately, no one did, and I was rerouted to the voice mail system. I left a message stating that I saw their ad online and was interested in becoming a roommate. I left my number and said to call back if they needed to. After that, I hung up and put the paper in my pocket, feeling mildly disappointed. I also took the money I got from my mother and put 40,000 yen of it in my dresser for safe keeping.

As I made my way back downstairs, I had an ingenious idea hit me. I realized that if I were to go into the kitchen and eat breakfast, what would happen is that Haruhi and I would end up leaving at the same time. Without a doubt she would then race me towards the meeting place like last time and beat me there again. This would of course mean that I would be the last one there again, as the other three were never late… ever. Since I desperately didn't want to throw all my money away, I decided that if I had to leave, now was the time while Haruhi was distracted.

Snickering to myself while I snuck into the garage, I grabbed my bike and lifted the door to the garage. After I got outside and closed the garage door, I jumped onto my bike and took off. I didn't mind that I was missing out on breakfast. Since I actually had a little extra money today, I figured I'd just buy myself something to eat later. I had to admit that even though I was nowhere near as smart as Haruhi, Nagato or Koizumi, I could be damn clever sometimes.

I made it only halfway there before I heard my cellphone ringing away. I had a really good laugh, knowing exactly who it was that was calling. I ignored the ringing, which didn't stop until I finally arrived at the meeting place and answered it. By the way, I was the first one to arrive. "Hello?"

"You bastard!" yelled Haruhi on the other line. "How dare you ditch me like that?!"

"What? I just wanted to get here early," I answered teasingly.

"I can't believe you would just leave and let all the food my mom cooked for you go to waste! Do you have any idea how rude that is?!"

Of all the people to talk about rudeness. "Just tell your father that he can eat it. That guy's practically a bottomless pit anyway."

It was very faint, but I could barely hear Oruki say "I heard that, smart ass!"

"Kyon! I order you to get your ass back here immediately!"

"No! I'm already here. I'm not riding all the way back there just so you can beat me on the way back." I knew she was only trying to get out of being last and having to pay for everyone's drinks and lunch. "You know, the other three members aren't here yet. If you hurry, you might just be able to beat them here."

I could hear Haruhi growling on the other line. "You're so going to pay for this, Kyon!" She then hung up, leaving me leaning on a nearby post with a satisfied smile. It's fun messing with Haruhi sometimes, even if I knew she would make me pay for it later.

It wasn't long before I saw the other three members arrive. They all arrived at practically the same time, making me wonder if they synchronized their arrival times or something. Anyway, since they were now here, that meant that Haruhi was officially the last one. Poor, poor Haruhi.

Asahina-san was the first to greet me. "Hello, Kyon-kun! I'm surprised to see you here so early."

"Indeed," said Koizumi. "It's quite rare that you arrive before us, and I don't see Suzumiya-san anywhere. I can only assume that you left before she was ready."

"Yep," I replied, hiding none of my contentment.

"You do realize that as competitive as Suzumiya-san is she'll likely be upset."

"She'll get over it." She can't win all the time.

We were standing around making small talk for a good five minutes before I finally saw Haruhi come into view. She was running as fast as she could, likely still hoping that she could make it before any of the other three Brigade members. I also noticed that she was carrying a bag with her. When she finally arrived, I decided not to say anything, and instead, I beamed a smile at her.

After Haruhi caught her breath, she made an announcement. "Well, I understand that normally under the current rules that the last person is usually the person to pay, but since Kyon here has committed several severe acts of misconduct over the last couple days, he will be the one to pay today!"

"What?! Are you kidding me?!" I yelled while feeling outraged. "That's ridiculous!"

"You should be lucky that I'm being as lenient as I am!"

You left me on the roof during a severe rain storm! I could've gotten pneumonia or worse. Wasn't that punishment enough?

"I hardly think being outside and getting a little water on you comes even close to evening out what you've done, Kyon! There's nothing more disrespectful than violating someone's right to privacy!"

I sighed deeply, knowing that this wasn't an argument I was going to win. "Fine, whatever. Let's just move on."

Minutes later, we were all sitting down and waiting for our drinks. While we waited, Haruhi decided to use this time to go over the details of our trip to Kyoto. Haruhi pulled out a map of Kyoto and explained how the groups would be divided while we started our search. Haruhi even went through all the trouble of gathering the "equipment" we would need over the course of the few days that we were there. Apparently on the first day, Haruhi and the other two girls would be in charge of searching the spot marked as area one while Koizumi and I would search the part of the city labeled area two. After we were done searching that day, we were to meet up at the hotel.

"Koizumi-kun was able to hook us up with a great deal at this really nice hotel!" explained Haruhi excitedly. "I've already set up our reservations there!"

"A friend of my family's owns the hotel," said Koizumi. "So I was able to get us a discount on our rooms."

Haruhi slammed her hands on the table, her million-watt smile beaming. "We're getting rooms at a four star hotel at two star prices! Can you believe it?"

That's easy to believe when you know that a certain someone has connections to a powerful, underground, organization of espers. I already knew his explanation of how he got us the discount was a load of crap.

Haruhi then continued to explain that on Saturday that our group would be split up again during the first half of the day, with Haruhi, Nagato and I searching area three and Asahina-san and Koizumi searching area four. Then after lunch, we'd split up again with Haruhi and I searching area five and the rest searching area six.

Of course, I had a few objections to the way we were being split up. "By the way, why is it that we're not just randomly splitting up like we usually do for city-wide searches?"

"We can't waste any time deciding groups. We have a whole city to search and not a lot of time to do it. Deciding it ahead of time saves time."

"Okay, then why is it that you're not grouping yourself with Koizumi during this trip?"

"The Vice-chief is in charge of the second group during the trip," answered Haruhi.

"Wait a minute!" I yelled. "I thought I was going to be Vice-chief during the trip!"

Haruhi poked my nose with her finger. "You lost that privilege yesterday do to your inexcusable behavior! Besides, you lack the responsibility to lead the second group during this trip! Too much is riding on us finding the extraordinary to leave it to you!"

I placed a hand on my face and groaned. Just how much more was she going to make me suffer for using her computer? Okay, maybe I deserved it for looking at her diary, but she didn't know that I looked at it. At least, I didn't think she did…

Haruhi then explained something else. "I also went and took the liberty of buying everyone's train ticket. Be sure to bring your ID to the train station since they're electronic."

"How'd you buy tickets for the four of us?" I asked. "Wouldn't you need our personal information to do that?"

Haruhi looked confused at my question, perhaps wondering why I wanted to know. "I just called Mikuru-chan, Yuki-chan and Koizumi-kun and asked them."

"Then how'd you get my personal information? You never asked me."

"I just called your mother and asked her," responded Haruhi nonchalantly.

"You called my mom! Why didn't you ask me?" I had to admit that I was somewhat disturbed by the fact that my mother gave out my personal information so easily to Haruhi.

Haruhi narrowed her eyes at me before answering. "Because you were stuck up on the roof, and it was raining."

I give up. You win. Looking at her diary was not worth all this trouble.

Our drinks were served shortly after that. When we were finished, we drew toothpicks to find out who we were groups with today. I was relieved to find that I was grouped with Koizumi and Nagato. I definitely needed a break from Haruhi.

There was one thing about the meeting we just had that really bothered me. I noticed that I was going to be paired up with Haruhi all day this Saturday, and it was going to be just the two of us during the second half of the day. This, combined with my knowledge of the last diary entry, made me unbelievably uneasy. I was also reminded of what Tsuruya-san said to Haruhi after the mud wrestling contest…

"You're really going to do it?! Go for it, Haruhi-nyan! You gots my support!"

… That's what she said. Could it really mean what I think it means?

"You seem distracted."

The voice, which belonged to a certain esper who will remain nameless, startled me out of my thoughts. By now, we had already left the café and were already doing our rounds around the city, with Nagato leading the way. I was sure that Nagato was making her way towards the library, since the way she was going was definitely heading that way.

I turned to Koizumi, denying that anything was wrong. "I'm fine."

"That's good to hear," said Koizumi in a tone that told me that he didn't really believe me. "The truth is that I've sensed a growing anxiety within Suzumiya-san."

"Well, this trip's a pretty big deal. I'm sure anyone would feel anxious about it."

Koizumi presented an annoying smile. "True, and yet I cannot help but get the feeling that there's something more to it than that. Suzumiya-san does not strike me as the type who would be nervous about arguing with an old man."

I didn't bother to respond, somewhat afraid of what Koizumi might be alluding to.

"Remember that week in February? The one where we had the treasure hunt?"

"Yeah," I responded. How could I forget? That was a hell of a week. Dealing with Asahina-san suddenly popping up inside the broom closet, helping her do weird tasks all over town, meeting that sneering bastard, and looking for a treasure that I knew we'd never find. Plus, there was Asahina-san's kidnapping and that weird thing that Tsuruya-san dug up. Good times.

"You of course remember the real reason for the treasure hunt."

"Yep," It was all an elaborate scheme cooked up by Haruhi so she could give Koizumi and I Valentine's Day chocolates. It wasn't good enough for her to just give us the chocolates. She had to come up with some goofy, over the top way of giving them to us. Of course, Asahina-san and Nagato also gave us some chocolates, too, but it was all Haruhi's idea. "So what? You're saying Haruhi's using this whole trip as just another over-the-top ruse?"

"Perhaps, but I cannot say for sure," said Koizumi as he shrugged his shoulders. "You of all people should know how unpredictable she can be. However, I suspect that her reasons for having this trip are linked to you almost moving away a few weeks ago. Perhaps Suzumiya-san has finally realized that things cannot stay as they are forever. Things change, and if we don't embrace what we have right here in front of us, it might be gone in a flash. For a while, it was enough that you were right there beside her, no matter what she did. However, in the brief time since you moved in with her, she must have realized that she's no longer satisfied with only having you by her side. I think she realizes that if she doesn't act soon, she might just lose you for good, and then she would forever be filled with regret."

I didn't want to listen to what Koizumi said. I knew exactly what he was talking about, but it bothered the hell out of me to think about it. I didn't want to believe that what he was saying was true. I didn't want to go on this stupid trip to Kyoto. And… I definitely didn't want Haruhi to confess to me. Why I didn't want that, I couldn't say. Why did the idea of going out with Haruhi scare me so much? What was so bad about having her as a girlfriend? She was beautiful, charismatic, energetic, smart and athletic. Sure, her personality was… an acquired taste, but I've been around her long enough that I should be used to that now. Her parents got along with me, or at least her mother did. But even when I took all these things into account, there was still a part of me that couldn't accept it. The idea of dating Haruhi scared the crap out of me, and I didn't know why.

Anyway, I decided to put these thoughts into the back of my mind when we arrived at the library. The three of us decided to try and enjoy ourselves while we were there. I picked out a couple of manga I hadn't read before and gave them a try. Koizumi kept himself occupied by reading a few magazines, some involving current events, others involving computer technology. Apparently, according to the magazine he was reading, a team at Tokyo U had designed a computer with advanced translation software that could translate a person's words in real time from Japanese to English. It still had

some bugs, but they'd hoped that it would be the precursor to handheld translators that could be used all over the world.

After a few hours, I looked at my watch and noticed it was time for us to go. I got up to go find Nagato. I found her in the foreign literature section reading Sir Thomas More's book *Utopia.*

"Enjoying yourself, Nagato?"

Nagato nodded without taking her eyes off the page.

"I'd hate to ruin your fun, but it's time for us to head back."

Nagato closed the book and put it under her arm, indicating that she intended to check it out. While heading to toward the front to check out the book, Nagato asked me a quick question. "Have you finished reading it?"

I took me a moment to figure out what she meant. "Oh, I've read most of it. I stopped right at this one point where I read this weird haiku. It looked out of place. Do you know what it was about?" I wasn't even sure if Nagato had even read the book before, so I wasn't sure if she could answer the question.

Nagato's answer took me by surprise. "Be sure to memorize it."

"Huh?" I responded. "You mean the haiku? Why?"

"It's important that you memorize it. You will know why later."

Never one to question the human interface's judgment, I told her I'd get to it as soon as possible.

The Brigade was once again together eating lunch (which I had to pay for). Haruhi and Asahina-san had a couple of shopping bags under their arms, a clear indication that the two of them had wasted time and money as well. While reaching into my pocket to pull out

the money I needed to buy lunch, I also pulled out the paper that had the address to that place I wanted to look at. I realized that if I didn't go a take a look at it soon that I might miss out on my chance to do it. This was especially true since Haruhi announced that the Brigade was going to have a city-wide search everyday after school this week to get ourselves ready for the trip. Just as I was finishing up, I tapped Haruhi's shoulder to get her attention.

"What up?" she asked.

I held up the piece of paper with the address. "Listen, I need to get going and visit this address today. If I don't, I won't have a chance to later this week."

Haruhi narrowed her eyes, likely because leaving a city-wide search early was against Brigade rules, not to mention the fact that I obtained the address by illegally using her computer. "You've really been pushing your luck lately, Kyon! Why should I let you go?"

"Well, you do realize that the month that I was allowed to stay at your place is quickly coming to an end, right? I need a place to stay."

Haruhi took a deep breath before responding. "I'm coming with you then!"

No, I could not let her ruin this chance. "Doesn't the Brigade need you to finish today's city-wide search? I mean, we're so close to going to Kyoto and all, if you abandon the other three now, how can we expect them to be ready for the trip?" It was a really lame excuse, but I had to try. "Besides, there's a chance that the guy I'm meeting might be a weirdo again."

"All the more reason for me to come with you. I can't expect you to be able to handle someone like that by yourself."

"I'll be fine," I assured her. "This is something I need to do on my own."

Haruhi crossed her arms in front of her for a few seconds and grunted. "Fine, but if you get into trouble, you only have yourself to blame!"

I thanked her and said goodbye to the rest of the Brigade before I took off. I made my way to my bike and rode my way to the address. Since it was close to where I used to live, it was rather easy to find the place. Just like how the advertisement said, the apartment complex was really nice. I saw the pool while I made my way inside the apartment building. I also saw a couple girls in bikinis sun-tanning next to it. Oh man, I hope I'm able to move in here!

I was soon in front of the door that was on the advertisement. I knocked on the door and waited. It took a few seconds before the door opened. I was surprised to find that there was no one on the other side of the door. Stranger still, when I entered the apartment, it appeared to be completely empty. There wasn't even any furniture inside. The moment I realized this, I become extremely nervous. I tried to turn around to walk out when the door suddenly closed. It was then that I saw a familiar face.

It was Asahina-san, or to be more accurate, it was the older version of her. "Asahina-san?"

"Hello again, Kyon-kun," said the woman sweetly. "It's been a while, hasn't it? At least, it has been for you."

I was immediately suspicious of her presence. I'd figured out quite a while ago that Asahina-san (big) was the one giving the orders to Asahina-san (small). I also learned that the older time-traveler could be very manipulative, and I had to be cautious. "What do you want?"

"Straight to the point today, aren't we?" asked Asahina-san. "Well, I guess it's to be expected. I'm obviously here for reason." She took a deep breath before continuing. "I'm sorry for coming up with such a roundabout way of meeting you. Since you're currently living with Suzumiya-san, it's become a bit more difficult to find a good opportunity to meet with you alone."

"I take it then that there isn't anyone living here looking for a roommate." I should have known that the advertisement was too good to be true.

"I am sorry, Kyon-kun, but I'm afraid that advertisement was nothing more than a lure to get you to come meet me here."

"What would have happened if someone else took up the offer and came down here?"

"The advertisement was only up for the few minutes that you were looking online. It was removed immediately after it served its purpose. History stated that you were going to look at the advertisement at that time and see it, so we had to comply with how history was meant to unfold."

I sighed deeply and placed my hand to my face. It bothered me how everything that happened in the past was apparently destined to happen. I could understand why Nagato no longer allowed herself to synchronize with her future selves anymore. It took away her sense of free will.

"So why did you lead me here?" I asked.

"Right," said the older Asahina-san. "The truth is that I came here to warn you of future events."

"Again?" I asked. "What is it this time?"

"This upcoming weekend you and the rest of the Brigade are going to Kyoto, am I correct?"

"Yeah. What about it?"

Asahina-san walked towards the window and began to stare outside. Her face was filled with concern. "I'm afraid that something bad will happen during your trip in Kyoto."

You've got to kidding me. Can't the Brigade ever go out and do something without having to worry about something bad happening? "How bad are we talking here?"

"The whole world will be in danger, I'm afraid."

What other kind of danger could I expect other than the world-ending kind? I rubbed the bridge of my nose before continuing. "Let me guess. This involves Haruhi, right?"

Asahina-san didn't answer right away. She just continued to stare out the window, watching a nearby tree sway in the wind. Eventually, she turned towards me and gently smiled. "There's nothing more for me to tell you, except this. There will be a location that will be of great importance to Suzumiya-san out in Kyoto. You won't realize it right away, but I urge you to pay attention during your trip. When the time comes, you'll find her there."

"That's it?" I asked. Was that the best she could do? That was incredibly vague. What did she mean by "when the time comes?" I then suddenly realized something else. If my suspicions were correct, then it's possible that… "Asahina-san, does any of this… have to do with Haruhi… confessing… to me?"

Asahina-san giggled a bit before answering. "I'm afraid I can't say. You'll find out soon enough." She then gave me a light bow. "That's all I have to say, unfortunately. I have to go now. Please remember what I told you, okay?" She then walked out the door to the apartment.

I walked out the apartment door as well a couple seconds later, but by then she was gone. I was now left feeling very uneasy. Asahina-san told me that something bad was going to happen, and I'm fairly sure now that Haruhi was now going to confess to me during the trip in Kyoto. Were the two events… linked? Did something bad happen because she confessed to me? It seemed like the most likely scenario. I was now, more than ever, finding myself dreading the trip to Kyoto.

It wasn't long before I returned home. When I walked by the living room, I found that Haruhi had already returned home and was watching something on TV with her parents. I guessed that she must've ended the city-wide search early after I left.

To my surprise, I found that she was smiling proudly while watching the TV. I also noticed Naru-san looking enthralled with what she was watching, while Oruki was… speechless. It was only when I looked at the TV that I understood why the three of them looked like they did. They were watching the movie the Brigade made for the cultural festival last year.

I took a seat next to Haruhi and watched the move with them. Since her parents now knew about the Brigade, there was no reason not to show the movie off, other than the obvious reasons. With all the terrible acting, crappy special effects, and non-existent plot, it was a chore to watch the movie again. I wasn't watching this movie because it was any good. Far from it. I just wanted to see the reactions of Haruhi's parents when it was over.

They were up to the last scene of the movie, right at the point where Shamisen started talking.

"Oh my! Is it really talking?" asked Naru-san excitedly.

"It's ventriloquism," said Haruhi, a hint of disappointment in her voice. No, Haruhi. We don't need my cat to start talking again.

A few minutes later the movie was over and the credits were up, along with Haruhi's ridiculous disclaimer that I made her say. Naru-san leapt to her feet and clapped wildly. "That was awesome! I can't believe you guys made that!" It surprised no one that Naru-san liked the movie. I get the feeling that her standards have never been high.

Haruhi turned to her father next. "What'd you think? Pretty cool, huh?"

Oruki didn't respond immediately. His mouth hung down as he stared out into space. It was only after Haruhi called on him again that he responded. "Oh… uh… well… no one can say that my daughter doesn't have an incredible imagination." That was Oruki's way of saying the movie sucked without being mean about it. Fortunately, Haruhi seemed satisfied by what he said. He then looked at me. "Kyon, you were the cameraman, right?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Your camerawork sucks!"

"He's right, Kyon," said Haruhi, whilst poking me in the chest. "If it wasn't for your crappy camerawork, our movie could have been award winning!"

Oh, right. Of course it's my fault, and not the fault of the insane producer/director/screenplay writer who was actually dumb enough to actually think we could do a movie without a script.

Naru-san gave a light giggle. "I thought the clumsy camerawork was charming."

Thanks… I think…

It was then that Oruki decided to stand up. "Kyon-kun, I need a favor. I have some furniture that I built that I want to bring to the furniture store down the road. Can you give me a hand getting it in and out of the car?"

I decided to agree to help, knowing that saying no wasn't an option.

"Let's watch it again!" said Naru-san.

I decided to go down into the basement as fast as I could to avoid having to see that monstrosity again.

Oruki had two different tables and the dog house that I helped him build earlier that he wanted to sell. Of course, I was the one that had to do all the work of getting them out of the basement and placing them next to the car. Oruki was in charge of placing them in the car or tying them to the top of the car. Several times, he yelled at me for bumping into the walls, which wasn't really my fault. Most of the furniture was heavy and was really hard to handle.

After we were done getting the furniture in place, Oruki and I took off down to the furniture store. When we got there, I was forced to take all the furniture off the car while Oruki talked to the store owner. After I took it off, the store took a look at it all. He was willing to purchase the tables, but he wasn't interested in the dog house, saying that dog houses didn't have a market in this area. I was forced to put the dog house back on the car while Oruki tied it down. A few minutes later, we were on our way back.

"Well, at least you were able to sell the tables," I said, trying to be positive.

"Yeah," said Oruki, looking a tad disappointed. "I had a feeling that I wouldn't be able to sell the dog house. Only the wealthy ever have lawns large enough for it to be worth it."

I nodded my head, feeling the conversation starting to die off. I stared out the window, finding that the local area was starting to look more familiar to me.

"So were you able to check out that one place?" Oruki asked.

I knew he must've been talking about the place I told him about earlier this morning. I could've told him the truth that it was nothing but a ruse to allow a certain time-traveler to meet with me, but I decided I didn't want Oruki to worry about it. "It's no good. The guy already found a roommate."

"Too bad."

It was then that I realized that I wasn't going to be able to find the time to look for anymore places before the trip. I had to ask Oruki if it would be okay if I could stay a little longer to give me more time to find a place. "Listen, Oruki? You see, I haven't had a whole lot of luck finding my own place this last month, and with all that's going to happen this week, I'm not going to have time to keep looking. I was wondering if it was okay if maybe I could stay a bit longer so I could have more time. Is that okay?" Haruhi herself said that she was sure that he'd say yes if I asked.

It was then that Oruki pulled the car over. This made me a bit nervous, but even then I wasn't prepared for what he asked me next. "Let me ask you something. What do you think of my daughter?"

My heart jumped to my throat when he asked me that. I had no idea how to answer him. "What do you mean?"

"Do you like her?"

Now, given what I knew about the man, I knew there was only one correct answer to this question. "Well, I like her as a friend."

Oruki looked at me suspiciously. "And that's all?"

"Yeah," I said somewhat nervously. "She's my best friend. That's all."

Oruki nodded a bit before he started looking out the window in front of him. I couldn't help but notice that he looked… almost upset. After about a minute, he said this. "My answer is no."

I felt myself becoming weak when I heard him say that. "W… what?"

"You heard me! When you come back from your trip, you're out the door!"

I couldn't believe what he was saying. "B… but…"

"No buts! You had your chance! You decided to screw around rather than going out every day looking for a place to live! You have no one

to blame but yourself!"

"But, if you kick me out, you do realize that'll upset your daughter, right?" Surely he wouldn't risk the world's safety just to make a point, right?

"Let me ask you this. What do you think is going to happen if you stay?"

I was confused by the question. "What do you mean?"

"Do you honestly think that Haruhi's just going to be fine with only being your friend forever?"

"What are you talking about?"

It was then that Oruki became visibly angry. "Don't you dare try to bull%$#^ me! I've known ever since I first laid eyes on you that she was in love with you! You can't tell me that you haven't noticed!"

I was completely taken aback by what he said. He knew? All this time? Of course he did. Very little ever gets by him.

Oruki continued his tirade. "You know what's going to happen if you stick around? I tell you what going to happen! You're going to break her heart! And then what do you think is going to happen to the world, smart guy!"

I had nothing to say. I felt myself slipping into deep despair. My eyes slowly descended to the floor of the car. What could I say? What could I do?

Oruki's voice softened a bit. "You already told me that you only liked her as a friend. If that's true, then… then it's best if you go now before it's too late."

I gathered all the emotional strength I had left to ask one last question. "Wouldn't she be mad at you if she knew that you kicked me out?"

"Probably," he said, much quieter now. "You don't worry about me. Besides, it'll be easier on her if you go… before you end up hurting her."

I buried my head in my hands. Now that Oruki basically told me that I was being kicked out of the house after I came back from the trip to Kyoto, I had no idea where I was going to go. I had completely failed in finding my own place to live. There were only two choices now. I'd either live on the streets… or move back with my parents up north.

After that, Oruki decided to start up the car and move on. We were home a couple minutes later… funny… I've been calling this place my home for a while now, even though it never really was my home. Oruki was nice enough to take the dog house inside by himself. I went inside and went upstairs.

When I entered the room, I saw the newspaper I was looking at yesterday on the floor. In anger, I decided to kick it. I couldn't believe it. After all I'd been through the last few weeks, I was right back where I started. I was now once again hit with the prospect of having to move up north, away from all my friends and away from Haruhi.

Why… why couldn't I just say that I loved her? Maybe he was right… maybe, I really didn't love her. And if that's the case, then perhaps it was best if I did leave. There was of course the fact that Haruhi was planning something during this trip to Kyoto. I had no idea how I was going to deal with that. Not to mention the warning Asahina-san (big) gave me. What was I going to do? It all felt so hopeless.

There was one thing I knew I had to do, unfortunately. I had to call my mother. I reluctantly picked up my phone and slowly dialed her number…

Well, what an unexpected turn of events. Now what is Kyon going to do? Why can't he just say he loves her? What the hell is wrong with him? Looks like this trip to Kyoto is going to be a

lot more than Kyon originally bargained for. Surely there must be something he could do to turn this around.

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed the chapter. I'll try to get the next chapter up by sometime this weekend. See ya then!

Chapter 23

I've been getting a lot of requests from people asking if it's okay if they could use Oruki and Naru in their fics. And my answer to that is absolutely. I think it's awesome that people want to use them. I only ask that you do three things.

You ask me ahead a time (I doubt I'll say no). You make mention in your author's notes that you're borrowing the characters from me. You also state that I've given permission.

Once you've done that, feel free to do whatever you want to them. Use them, abuse them, bash them, torture and kill them, I could care less. I'd probably laugh if you bashed them or killed them. I'm weird that way.

Anyway, I'm happy that once again the last chapter was well liked. We're almost to the trip to Kyoto! Gah, I'm going to have to do a lot of research on Kyoto. I desperately want to make sure that I get it as accurately as I possible can without actually visiting it or being a Japanese native.

As always, I hope you enjoy the chapter!

Chapter 23

What a miserable week. For the last three days we've been going on one pointless city-wide escapade after another, and Haruhi's been more and more serious about the searches every day. We hadn't even had the chance to goof off, or more specifically, I haven't. Whenever I've been grouped with Haruhi, she would force me to do idiotic activities such as looking under cars or looking into garbage dumpsters, all for the sake of finding the mysterious. And if I were partnered with anyone other than Haruhi, she would sneak up on us to make sure we weren't goofing off. Of course, we were goofing off,

so Haruhi would give us a scolding speech about responsibility and such, even though the fact of the matter is that while she was spying on me, she wasn't searching, either.

Then there was yesterday evening. I was helping that bastard Oruki with a project of his down in the basement. Unfortunately, I lacked the sense to wear socks while I was down there, and a splinter soon entered the flesh of my foot, unleashing the gift of stabbing pain into it. The truth is that it really wasn't a big deal, but when you're in a sour mood, the smallest annoyances get magnified ten-fold. I spent the next half-an-hour cursing and yelling while I tried to remove the damn splinter with a knife. Haruhi insisted more than once that she should give it a try, but there was no way I was going to let her near my foot with a knife. No way!

And of course Oruki had to be an ass and say 'Why don't we just remove the foot. I'd be way easier' with a completely serious face. Shut up, you bastard! You're not funny! I'm so happy that your daughter didn't inherit your crappy sense of humor… then again, her sense of humor isn't really much better.

Eventually, I was able to remove the evil splinter and look at it with my own eyes. It's amazing how such a tiny piece of wood could cause so much pain.

And every night, I've been having that dream again about my cousin. It just won't go away. And sometimes, I realized that the face of my cousin was replaced by Haruhi's. Strangely though, every time Haruhi appeared in the dream, she had her long hair again, and it would be tied with four ponytails. Nevertheless, the dream went about exactly the same as before. I'd watch her kiss that other guy, and all those wretched feelings would return just like when I first felt them. The dream would always end with me falling off my bike and landing on the asphalt. I've been perplexed as to why my dreams have been like this. I would have liked nothing more than for the dreams to go away.

Anyway, none of these things are really all that important. The truth of the matter is that I've been depressed and irritable all week. Of course the reason for this was because I was being forced to move out of this place the day after I return from the trip to Kyoto. Perhaps the worst part is the fact that I haven't told Haruhi. And no, I haven't kept it from her because I was afraid or anything. I just didn't want to ruin the trip to Kyoto. She's been looking forward to this damn thing for a while now, and we've all worked hard to make it happen. It would be a shame to ruin it. Yes, leaving Haruhi in the dark about why I've been moody all week was the lesser of two evils.

Obviously, Haruhi has asked me repeatedly why I've been down so much lately, but I've played it off as anxiousness over the upcoming trip. I've tried my best to keep my mood cheerful, but I knew I was failing. That and the lack of sleep were definitely getting to me. The problem was that I couldn't even say "I can't wait for this trip to end" because the day after it does I was going up north to live with my parents again.

Yes, that's right. I was moving. I already bought the train ticket.

That isn't to say that I didn't consider other options. I thought about obtaining aid from both Nagato and Koizumi. Hell, I even thought about asking Kunikida or Taniguchi if I could stay at their places. But all these option posed one problem, Haruhi and her growing feelings for me. Whether I wanted to admit it or not, Oruki was right. If I didn't love Haruhi back, I should go before I broke her heart. It's better for me, her and the whole world if I did that.

But if it was the right thing to do, then why do I still feel so terrible over it. My mind and emotions have been in constant conflict with one another. A part of me feels relieved that I'm finally leaving, another completely dejected. Why can't I get over it?

And still that's not even the worst of it. Then there's the whole trip to Kyoto itself. If what Asahina-san (big) has told me was true, than something bad was going to happen during our trip. And then there were all the signs I've been getting that Haruhi's planning to finally

confess to me during the trip itself. Dammit, I don't want that to happen! I'd been praying to whatever god I could think of in a hope that she wouldn't confess to me during the trip. What would I say to her if she did? What could I say? I had no idea. All I hoped for was that this supposedly bad thing that was going to happen was unrelated to Haruhi's upcoming confession.

The only good news I've had came in the form of two extremely vague clues. Asahina-san (big) said "There will be a location that will be of great importance to Suzumiya-san out in Kyoto. You won't realize it right away, but I urge you to pay attention during your trip. When the time comes, you'll find her there." What place could it be? And how the hell would I know when the time comes? The only thing I could assume was that "her" must have meant Haruhi. I guess I'll have to take her advice and pay attention.

More confusing was the other clue…

When confronting her.

He held on the stage's edge.

He then let it go.

What the hell is that supposed to mean? Once again, I could assume that *her* meant Haruhi and *He* was me, but that's about it. What did she mean by *stage's edge ?* And what exactly did I *let go* ? Was it some twisted metaphor? Whenever I tried to ask Nagato about it, she refused to answer, saying that the answer would become clear when the time was right. Why the hell did I have to wait until "the time is right?" Why couldn't I know now?

Why couldn't I ever get any easy answers?

These were all the thoughts that were swirling my head today during lunch. It's Thursday, the day before the ever eventful trip. I was once again sitting with Taniguchi and Kunikida. I decided not to tell them I was moving. I didn't want to hear their whining and complaining.

Taniguchi decided to start up a conversation. "Hey, Kyonko!"

Bastard! Stop calling me that! I thought we had an agreement that you weren't allowed to tease me anymore if I made you a judge of that god-forsaken mud wrestling contest.

Taniguchi shrugged his shoulders. "That wasn't the agreement. I only said I'd stop teasing you about you and Suzumiya-san. By the way, I heard in Kyoto that there are these rocks that are called love rocks. Legends says that if you can walk from one rock to the other with your eyes closed that you'll be happily in love with the one you seek. Are you going to try and walk from one rock to the other? Who knows, you might just get lucky and finally be with the girl of your dreams." He was mockingly puckering his lip after he said that.

Ass&^%$! Didn't you just say you weren't going to tease me about Haruhi?! You already went back on our agreement!

"I didn't say anything about Suzumiya-san," said Taniguchi innocently. "You're the one who brought her up."

I immediately lost patience with him and got up from my desk. I decided I wasn't hungry and left the classroom to go take a walk. I was still very much in a foul mood. I had hoped that wandering the halls would help with my mood, but it failed. By the time I made it to the roof, I was just as upset as I was when I got up. Unfortunately, when I got up there, I found someone that I didn't want to run into.

"Ah, good day, Kyon-kun."

It was Koizumi. He was standing at the edge of the roof looking out into the sky. I merely greeted him plainly before taking a seat next to him. "Yo."

"You appear unnerved," he said. "Anything you feel you need to get off your chest?"

No. But I'm pretty damn sure that you're going to talk my ear off anyway.

Koizumi gave me an annoying smirk before he turned back to the clouds.

"It's almost been a year now."

"What was that?" I asked, my voice barely hiding my melancholy.

"It's almost been a year since that day when Suzumiya-san almost recreated the world."

Don't remind me. The images of that night are still within the recesses of my brain. The grey sky. The blue giants. And Haruhi and I… "Why'd you bring it up?"

Koizumi put his hand in his chin thoughtfully. "The truth of the matter is that it will be exactly the one year anniversary of that day this Saturday. When I realized this yesterday, I was utterly amazed. But thinking about it now, I know for sure that it's not a coincidence."

I had nothing to say. This was not what I wanted to hear. I'm not the type of person who believes in destiny or anything like that. I didn't want to believe that Haruhi had this whole thing set up on purpose. That it wasn't a coincidence that this James Randi guy was having a conference at a convention center in Kyoto and thus giving Haruhi an excuse to set up this whole trip just so she could confess to me. I sunk my head a bit. Everything seemed so simple a week ago, even if I was killing myself digging up dirt for the mud wrestling tournament. It's amazing how things could get out of control so quickly.

If Koizumi had anything else to say, I didn't remember it. I was too much in a daze. When I realized that lunch was almost over, I got up and returned to class. My attempt to make myself feel a little better failed miserably. I now felt worse than before. By the time I entered

the classroom, Haruhi had already made it back. I could tell that she noticed my disposition.

"What's wrong with you? You've been like this all week."

"I'm fine." I lied as I took my seat in front of her and buried my head in my arms. "I'm just not feeling that good."

If Haruhi thought I was lying, she didn't show it or say it. The rest of class went by like a blur, mostly because of my apathy. What was the point in paying attention when I was going to be gone next week?

I was now in the clubroom. We were making the last of our preparations. For our equipment, we had the following: Five butterfly nets, three glass jars, two small wooden containers, two digital cameras, two cheap magnifying glasses, two pairs of "X-ray" glasses, and the digital camcorder that we used to shoot the movie. I shook my head when I looked at all the stuff, half of which I knew would be completely useless. Yet Haruhi managed to find some excuse as to why we needed all of it.

"I think we're good now," said Haruhi, looking at all the items with satisfaction. "Tomorrow, we'll run into the clubroom and grab all these items before we head down to the train station. We've done a lot of training this week to prepare for the main event. Tomorrows going to be very busy, so tonight I'm going to allow you guys time to rest. Make sure your ready, because we're not going to stop until it's late tomorrow night."

Everyone in the room nodded in understanding. After that, Haruhi dismissed us.

Haruhi and I were now walking home. There was complete silence between us now. This was likely my fault, due to my somber mood. Unfortunately, it wasn't long before Haruhi decided to say something about it.

"Are you feeling any better now?"

"I'm fine," I said, doing a poor job of hiding how I was really feeling.

Haruhi looked at me suspiciously. "Are you hiding something from me?!"

I guess I couldn't blame her for being suspicious. The last time I was like this I was in fact hiding something, and I was hiding something now as well. I tried my best to deny it, though. "Of course not. I told you I'm just not feeling well."

Haruhi narrow her eyes and glared at me. She then began to move into my personal space. I reacted by backing away. We both kept moving until my back was up against a pole. No longer able to back away any further, I was trapped as Haruhi moved unbelievably close to my face while still glaring at me. I felt it again… my heart. Every time she gets this close, it starts to race. Go away!

"Tell me the truth," she said in a low tone.

I swallowed hard as I tried to resist her form of intimidation. I wanted to tell her. I really did, but I knew what would happen if I told her. Without a doubt, Haruhi would race home and butt heads with her father. A huge fight would ensue, and who knew how bad it could get. In the end, though, I knew Haruhi would lose. Oruki was the only person on the planet that she couldn't bully or push around. Ultimately, it would solve nothing, and then we'd all would be bummed out during the entirety of the trip. Hell, the trip could even be canceled, and then that would ruin everything. No, I had to shoulder this burden alone. For that sake of the trip and for the sake of Haruhi, I would not say anything.

"I told you it's nothing."

Haruhi glared at me for a few more seconds before she finally gave up and sighed deeply. She stepped back and rested her cheek on

her hand. "Then cheer up already. I don't want you to be a downer during the whole trip.

I gave her a bit of a fake smile. "I'll do what I can."

Haruhi smiled back and threw her hand in the air. "That's the spirit! Let's go!"

It was then that the two of us went home… I did it again. It's not my home. I needed to stop thinking that.

I was relaxing in the living room, watching TV. Oruki had told me that I didn't have any work to do today, so I was free to try and relax. Haruhi and I had already finished our homework, so there was really nothing left to do but sit around and wait.

It was then that Naru-san snuck into the living room. "Kyon-kun, I need to talk to you."

I turned to her and smiled lightly. "What's up?"

She took a seat on the couch next to me while looking back and forth. "Where's Haru-chan?"

"She upstairs in her room. Probably scheming away for the trip tomorrow."

Naru-san breathed a sigh of relief before speaking again. "Kyon-kun, remember our talk about what I should do if I heard a secret?"

Not this again. Let me guess. She knows a secret. "Yeah."

Naru-san began to fidget around a bit before continuing. "Well you see, Haru-chan and I have been able to talk a bit lately, and she told me something really important that I wasn't supposed to say to anyone. Now you told me that if I had trouble keeping it to myself that I should just tell you. There's a problem, though."

"What's that?"

"I'm especially not supposed to tell you what she told me. That was what Haru-chan said to me. The thing is that…"

"Stop." I said while interrupting her. I put my hand to my face and sighed deeply. "Let me guess. It's something to do with me and our trip to Kyoto."

Naru-san seemed a bit surprised. "You already knew?"

"Let's just say that I've been given a lot of clues lately." I said, feeling even more down.

I think Naru-san picked up on how I was feeling. "What's wrong, Kyon-kun. You seem really down."

I decided to confide in Naru-san. She was probably to only person I could think of that I could tell. "Has your husband told you what will happen to me when we come back?"

Naru-san stared at me a bit before nodding. "Yes, I heard."

"The truth is that I really don't want to go, but I don't really have a choice."

"Oh…" said Naru-san a she began to stare at the carpet, perhaps starting to become a bit depressed, too.

It was then that I realized that now was a good chance to thank Naru-san for all she'd done while I was here. I had a feeling I wasn't going to get the chance if I didn't do it now. "Naru-san, I want to thank you."

Naru-san seemed a bit confused. "For what?"

"For everything. If it weren't for you, I don't think I could have made it through this whole month. You're the breath of fresh air in this place. I don't care what anyone says about you, you're a great mother, wife,

friend and person, and I'm glad I met you." I decided that I would be the one to hug her this time. She was taken aback by this, obviously not used to being the one who was hugged first, but she soon returned the hug. It was a nice moment in what had otherwise been a lousy week.

I soon let go, feeling a smidge better than before. Naru-san gave me a million-watt smile before speaking. "I have a feeling things will work out in the end, Kyon-kun. Try to look up."

I wish I had your confidence, Naru-san. I really wish I did.

Naru-san got up and gave me a light bow. "I'm going to go work on dinner now. I'll give it my best!"

I wouldn't expect any less from you. "Thanks again, Naru-san."

Naru-san nodded and went into the kitchen. I was once again left to watch TV. I was watching one of those wacky game shows, hoping it would cheer me up a bit. Sadly, watching the contestants make idiots of themselves was not really enough to lighten my mood, and I actually found myself slipping back into my depressed state. Damn this sucked bad.

It wasn't long before Oruki exited the basement. He approached me with a serious look on his face. "I wanted to get a chance to talk to you before you went on your trip, and I know I'm not going to get the chance tomorrow, so let's go."

I looked up at him weakly. I didn't know what he had to say, but I honestly wasn't in the mood to hear it. I was still feeling a little sour about being kicked out, even if it was for a good reason. I got up anyway, though, and the two of were soon out the door and in his car.

The trip down to Oruki's location of solitude was quiet. Whatever he had to say, he obviously wanted to wait until we got there before he said it. It would be about twenty minutes before we finally arrived.

The two of us exited the car and sat in the hood while we stared down the sunset. He didn't say anything for a good five minutes, perhaps trying to gather his thoughts before he spoke.

Eventually, he found the urge to speak. "Look… I know you're down… And I really wouldn't blame you. I know you don't want to move but…" He was silent again while he scratched his chin. "I… I like you, kid. I really do. You're a good kid. Not perfect, but who is? After all, you've been dealing with a lot on your shoulders for a while now, and I hardly think that's fair for anyone. If I thought it was for the best, I would have let you stay, but…" His face started becoming very serious again. "I'll do whatever it takes to protect my daughter."

I didn't say anything for a bit, thinking through what he said. I couldn't disagree with him. I have had a lot of responsibility over the last year. Although I would say I've done well for myself in handling someone with the power to alter and destroy the world, it's still a lot for anyone to handle, let alone a teenage boy. "So, are you saying that you're going to keep your daughter in line?"

"I'll do what I can." He said, sounding despondent. "I was able to handle it the first three years before you came along, and that was before I knew the truth. To be quite honest, the whole thing still scares the hell out of me, but I'll manage."

I figured there was at least one more thing to tell him. "Just so you know, a birdie told me that something bad was going to happen during this trip."

Oruki looked at me with concern. "What kind of bad thing? And how bad?"

"Bad," I said in a way that really emphasized the level of severity.

"Why can't we just cancel the trip if something would happen?"

"Then you would upset Haruhi and replace one bad thing with another. Besides, it was a time-traveler that told me. When a time

traveler says something is going to happen, it has to happen. History must play out the way they say it does."

Oruki stared at me for a bit before shaking his head. "I don't think I understand any of this."

"You better figure it out when I'm gone. You're going to have a lot on your plate when I'm gone. And I'm sure Koizumi's going to talk your ear off… a lot."

"You mean Mr. Smiles? I hate that kid. Something about him."

I chuckled lightly when I heard that. "He gets on my nerves sometimes, too."

It was then that Oruki gave me a smile. "You know what I'm in the mood for?"

No! Please don't say it!

"That's right! Exercise! Nothing raises the spirit like a good old fashioned exercise!"

I highly disagree! "Uh… Haruhi said for all of us to rest up for tomorrow and…"

"Bah! Rest is for the weak! You'll have plenty of time to rest when you're dead!"

He then grabbed me by the collar and threw me in the car. Before long, we were off to that god forsaken dojo. I swear, it's like this guy thinks I'm made of gundanium or something. I hate his god damn guts!

Oh, and by the way, it didn't raise my spirits…

I want to apologize for the short chapter, but this was meant to be the last of the set up chapters before I finally started to get to

Kyoto. I'm going to be busy doing research, so I wouldn't expect to see the chapter done till next weekend.

Until then, hope you enjoyed the chapter. (Oh, and episode 13 of the season relaunch was made of win!)

Chapter 24

I cannot apologize enough for the delay of this chapter. The delay was a mix of too much school work (I had to finish the school term and had a ton of work to do) and writer's block. Luckily, I'm on break from school for the next two weeks, so I'll be able to try and catch up on this fic.

And so it finally begins. The trip to Kyoto. To be perfectly honest, I've been a bit worried about writing these next three chapters. I did what I could as far as research goes, but even still, I wasn't sure if I did it was well as it could be.

I would also like to say a sad farewell to the new episodes of Haruhi (it's a little overdue, I know). Hopefully, it won't take another three years for more new episodes to appear.

By the way, there's some alcohol use in this chapter. If that bothers you, you clearly haven't read the light novels…

Well, I hope you guys enjoy it.

Chapter 24

I was on the train now. There was definitely no going back. Despite my wishes, I was seated next to Haruhi, with Koizumi, Nagato and Asahina-san sitting on the other side of the aisle. The anxiousness I had felt all week was now stronger than ever. I wanted this trip to be over with as soon as possible, but I knew it was going to drag. I didn't even have the luxury of sitting next to the window so I could stare out of it to try and clear my thoughts. Although having an aisle seat wasn't so bad, given my current mood, it wasn't my ideal choice.

Haruhi picked up her school bag and removed some of her school books. "We should work on our homework while we're on our way there. That way it'll be done by the time we arrive, and it won't be in the way."

Even though I was already aware of the utter futility of me doing my homework at this point, I decided that it was best to appease her. After all, I still couldn't tell her the truth yet, and I figured doing homework might be a good distraction. I pulled out my books as well and began what would be my last set of homework assignments for North High. I was going to miss having such a good tutor helping me with my studies.

Actually, I was going to miss a lot about Haruhi… Never mind. I need to get back to studying…

We were now at our destination. It was hard to believe we were really here, but the huge crowd of people at the train station at this time was hard evidence that it was true. I looked at Haruhi, who was looking through a travel guide that she had bought earlier.

"We need to check into the hotel first before anything else," said Haruhi as she quickly skimmed the surprisingly thick book. "Once we're there, we'll drop our stuff off and split up. Does anyone not know what they'll be doing when we split?"

I raised my hand, partly because I was still clueless as how I was going to properly search a whole city. "Where exactly am I looking today?"

"Stupid Kyon!" yelled Haruhi sourly. "Don't you remember? You're searching area two!"

To reiterate my question, where am I looking? I have no idea where area two is.

"Both Area one and two are in central Kyoto!" stated Haruhi loudly while placing her hands on her hips. "Weren't you paying attention to

the map when we went over this?"

Of course not. There's no point in trying to figure out where the hell I'm headed. I already know we're not going to find anything.

"Just forget it," said Haruhi as she began to walk towards the exit. "Just follow Koizumi around!"

Sounds good enough to me. The less I have to think about, the better. I already have too much on my mind right now.

We all left shortly after that, taking a smaller passenger train deeper into the city. Haruhi seemed engrossed in the contents of the travel guide. She then suddenly blinked in surprise and smiled. "Hey! Did you know that Nintendo holds its headquarters in this city?"

"Fascinating," responded Koizumi. "Are you considering making a visit there?"

"Nah," answered the Brigade Chief. "Corporate headquarters are usually boring." She then appeared to think about the idea a bit more. "But then again, sneaking our way into the Research and Development Department just to see what prototype game system they might be working on would be cool…" She then starts stroking her chin as she slipped deeper into her train of thought, that infamous smile of hers growing.

I of course knew what she was thinking and immediately knew it was a bad idea. I had to get her to forget about it. "So what happened to finding something mysterious? Have you given up on that already?"

Haruhi glared at me with an annoyed expression. "Of course not! I was only fantasizing. Don't think for second that I don't have my priorities straight!"

Wait. Since when did you ever have priorities?

"You better cut it out with your attitude, Kyon," said Haruhi as she pointed her finger directly at me. "Don't think that you're safe from penalties while we're on this trip!"

I decided to ignore her statement and leaned my head against the window. I was less than excited by the thought of walking all over the city. Somewhere in the back of my mind I had hoped an N2 mine would explode few miles away, vaporizing the nearby area and canceling this trip early. Of course, I wasn't serious about the notion. Killing a few hundred thousand people so I wouldn't have to go through with this trip was hardly a fair trade.

Eventually, we arrived at our destination. We only had to walk about a block before we arrived at the hotel. It had more western-style accommodations, an indication that the building wasn't terribly old.

"I want to apologize if you were hoping for more traditional hotel accommodations," said Koizumi as he scratched the back of his head. "The friend of our family had this hotel built a couple years ago, believing that Kyoto could use one with a more modern style."

Haruhi didn't seem terribly bothered by this fact. "It's fine, Koizumi-kun. The SOS Brigade should embrace the new as well as the old."

I decided not to think about whether there was any truth in Koizumi's words and merely went to what was going to be the room Koizumi and I would share after we checked in. I found out that Haruhi booked suites for both rooms. Both rooms had a large TV, large, comfy beds, a desk (which I assumed was meant for businessmen who wanted to do work) and a few other nice furnishings. It wasn't top-grade, but it was considerably nicer than a standard room. After dropping off our luggage, we went out the front door with all of our useless gear in hand.

Haruhi decided to give all of us one last motivational speech before we were to split up. "I don't want any of you to be discouraged by the fact that we have such a large city to search. I'm not expecting you to search every inch of it. You can speed things up by using common

sense. Try to keep your search focused on locations where the mysterious are most likely to occur. And most importantly of all, do not allow yourself to be distracted by the sights of the city. We only have a day and a half to search, so we can't waste time."

Wait, you want us to use common sense while we search a city for stuff we know we won't find? Am I the only one here who sees the irony in all this. If I were to use my common sense, I would just drop all this useless crap and go soak in a hot spring.

Haruhi glared at me a bit before continuing. "I expect every one of you to take this seriously. This is not a vacation, and anyone who is caught not doing what they're supposed to will be penalized to the fullest extent of the law!"

What laws are you talking about? I'm more than thankful that the law makers in this country have way more sense than you ever will.

"We'll meet up here at nine tonight," announced Haruhi before raising her hand in the air. "Let's go!"

Minutes later, Koizumi and I were now walking down the street, looking like complete morons with our butterfly nets. Koizumi had his own copy of the travel guide, and he was skimming through it, probably looking for ideas on where to go. After a minute, he appeared to have found something. He looked at his watch to before giving me his ever obnoxious grin. "We could check out the International Manga Museum if we hurry. It's still open for another hour."

I shrugged in response. "That's fine with me. It should kill some time."

During our trip to the museum, I noticed that if anything described Kyoto, it was that it was a blending of old and new. It was the former capitol of Japan after all. Throughout the entire city, one could find temples, palaces, and other ancient architecture strewn about. In between all of it were buildings with much more modern, western

architecture. To some, this may seem a bit weird, but given the weirdness I've seen in my lifetime (most of it coming from the last year or so), I was left somewhat unimpressed. Of course, this could just be my lousy mood affecting my perception.

It only took us fifteen minutes to arrive at the museum. Since Koizumi and I were high school students, the entrance fee was a cheap 300 yen each. The security there was suspicious of the "gear" we were carrying, and we were asked to leave our stuff up at the front, not that I blame them. Anyone walking around a city with a butterfly net deserves all the suspicion in the world.

The manga museum had many exhibits for us to look at, including works dating back over a hundred years ago. It also had some more contemporary works as well. Likely the biggest draw for this place was the fact that it acted like a giant library stocked to the brim with thousands of copies of manga, both new and old. For someone willing to spend the time, the admission fee was a small price to pay for such access. Unfortunately, Koizumi and I only had 45 minutes to spend, which quickly flew by. When the announcement was made that it was time to leave, the two of us returned to the front and retrieved our stuff before we went on our way.

"So where to next?" asked Koizumi as if he was completely out of ideas.

"How am I supposed to know?" I replied bluntly. "You're the one I'm supposed to follow, remember?"

"Indeed," said Koizumi as he continued to look through the travel guide. "Unfortunately, many of the main tourist locations close at around this time."

Of course they would. Leave it to our brilliant "Brigade Chief" to have us walk around a city when anything remotely interesting would be closed.

Koizumi chuckled a bit while shrugging. "Of course, we're technically not supposed to be sight-seeing."

"You're not seriously considering having us actually 'look' of strange things, are you?"

"Of course not," said the esper as he seemed to have found something in the travel guild. "It seems that there's another museum we can visit that's open until 7:30."

Is that the best you can do? Museums? What could possibly be more exciting? "Why don't we just wait at the hotel until it's almost nine before we leave and come back? We'll give the appearance that we were just arriving there."

"As much as I would enjoy such an idea, I fear that it may not fool Suzumiya-san. She may even decide to come back to the hotel early to make sure we're not shrugging off our responsibilities."

As much as I didn't want to admit it, he had a point. It would be like Haruhi to pull such a stunt. Knowing this, I relented on the idea of visiting the other museum. At least it was better than walking around like a bunch of idiots. "So where's this other museum?"

The Museum of Kyoto was one of those museums designed to give a general overview of the history of the city. It was composed of several wings, each displaying many ancient artifacts of historic value. To be honest, this place was far better suited for people who are unfamiliar with the city's history (namely foreigners or children). High school or university students who have already been drilled with all the basic details of this city's history aren't likely to learn anything new here. In other words, I was bored out of my mind. The good news was that since Koizumi and I were high school students, admission was free.

By the time 7:30 rolled around, I had my fill of all the exhibits and was thoroughly ready to leave. We grabbed our stuff at the front

(since we had to leave it behind again) and left the premises. I'd managed to take a few pictures of some of the exhibits as proof to Haruhi later that we were out looking for the unusual. I figured I would come up with some excuse that we were looking for…

Before I could finish my thought, I heard my phone ringing. I picked it up to find that it was Haruhi on the other line. I answered the phone with a sour look on my face. "Hello?"

"Find anything?" asked Haruhi, wasting no time in getting to the point.

"Nope?" I answered nonchalantly.

"Were you two really looking?" asked the Brigade Chief in an accusing tone.

"Yes," I answered in a slightly annoyed manner. "We went to two museums."

"Damn you, Kyon!" yelled Haruhi. "I thought I made it clear that this was not a sight-seeing trip!"

Why the hell are you yelling at me for? Since Koizumi is technically in charge or the second team, wouldn't it be his fault that we went to the museums?

"Put Koizumi on now!" demanded Haruhi.

Why didn't you just call him in the first place? He is the leader of the second group after all, since you so wonderfully decided to rip that honor away from me even though I earned it.

"Enough with your attitude, Kyon!" shouted Haruhi. "What's with you, anyway? You've been cranky all day!"

I decided not to answer and instead handed the phone to Koizumi. Even if I wanted to tell her why my mood was so craptastic, I couldn't

for fear of ruining the trip. I'd rather that Koizumi dealt with her anyway.

Koizumi took the phone from me and began to speak. "Hello? Yes… My apologies, Suzumiya-san. I had hoped that looking at some ancient artifacts might lead to us finding something interesting."

Dammit, that was going to be my idea! Was the thought of it that obvious, or was Koizumi a mind-reader?

Koizumi continued his conversation with Haruhi. "I'm terribly sorry that we haven't found anything yet… yes?… Ah, okay… I understand. I'll make sure of it… very well. We'll see you at nine. Bye." He then hung up the phone and handed it back to me.

"So what did she say?" I asked as I put the phone away.

"She merely said 'good thinking' about the museum idea before telling me your punishment."

"What punishment? What did I do?"

Koizumi shrugged before answering. "She told me that due to your attitude that you were required to carry all the equipment until we arrived at the designated spot in front of the hotel at nine."

Please don't tell me you're actually going to make me do that, because if you do, you're likely in for a fight.

Koizumi chuckled before responding. "Of course I won't make you carry all of it the whole time, although I will ask that you carry it before we meet up with Suzumiya-san, just to keep up appearances." He then looked at his watch before looking at me again. "We may as well just walk around for another hour before we return. None of the tourist locations are open at this time now."

"Fine with me," I said as I put my butterfly net over my shoulder.

For most of the remaining time, Koizumi and I traveled the streets of Kyoto, familiarizing ourselves with the sights of the city. For the first half-an-hour, neither of us said a whole lot. It was only when we stopped at a pedestrian crosswalk that Koizumi chuckled about something.

"Something on your mind?" I asked regretfully. In hindsight, I should have known that asking that would lead into a long exposition.

"It's nothing. I've just been thinking about a little theory that I've been toying around with in my head for the last few days."

Oh boy. Another theory. Is this one about Haruhi, too?

"Actually, it's a bit different," answered Koizumi. "It's actually something that came to mind when I recently watched a science program talking about the 'M Theory.'"

"What the hell is that?" I asked, starting to become confused.

"My understanding of the theory isn't complete, so you'll have to forgive me. I'm not a physicist after all. If I remember correctly, the theory states that there are exactly eleven dimensions of reality that exist. We ourselves cannot perceive anymore then four of them. The other seven can only be perceived mathematically. Anyway, it's stated that the eleventh dimensional layer is the layer to which all of reality as we know or don't know resides. And in that dimension, our universe floats within it like a piece of fabric, or 'membrane.' The 'M' in membrane is where the theory gets its name."

I was completely lost at this point. If he was talking about something that he barely understood, what chance did I have at understanding it?

The crossing signal changed, telling us it was okay to move. Koizumi continued his speech while we walked. "There's an important component to this theory. According to the program I watched, the membrane that composes our universe isn't the only one floating in

the eleventh dimension. In fact, there are an unlimited number of other membranes, other universes that float around in this dimension as well. Each and every one of those universes is different from the last. Every possible form of reality, existing simultaneously alongside each other."

"So what? Does that mean we've proven the existence of other parallel dimensions?"

"Well, the theory is still in its infancy, and there are many physicists who argue against it, but if the theory continues to hold true, then yes. And that's where I started thinking. I've already told you about the Organization's theory that Suzumiya-san created this universe four years ago. It's also possible that she's remade this universe many times."

"Are you saying she's remade all the other universes, too?" I asked, completely failing to see where he's going with all this.

"Not exactly. I personally do not believe that Suzumiya-san's power extends beyond the realm of this universe. If it did, there would be the question of 'who else could also shape the Multiverse in such a way?'"

"Multiverse?"

"That's the term used to describe the collection of every universe in existence. Anyway, if Suzumiya-san could affect the Multiverse, then so could all the infinite number of other Suzumiya-sans that existed in all the other parallel dimensions. You can see why this would be a problem. The Multiverse would exist in constant chaos. And since this universe appears unaffected by anyone other than our own Suzumiya-san, then it's safe to conclude that all the Suzumiya-sans in all of existence can only affect the reality of their home universe."

The thought of an infinite number of Haruhis made my head hurt. "So does that mean that there are an infinite number of us as well?"

"Precisely," answered Koizumi as he wiped some sweat off his brow. "There are likely an infinite number of versions of you and me, as well as Nagato-san and Asahina-san. Some are exactly like us, some are slightly different, and some are radically different. But that wasn't my original point. What I was trying to state before was that there must have been a parent dimension to this one." As if anticipating my question, Koizumi cuts me off and continues. "The parent dimension is likely the dimension that started it all for this universe. It was the first one to be remade. Maybe it was the one before this one, maybe the hundredth. The point is that the first version of this universe was likely similar to this one, without the aliens, time-travelers and espers, of course. Yet, it was still a world capable of supporting life."

I was starting to wonder when he would finish. "And?"

"It would seem a strange, nearly impossible coincidence that the laws of physics in this universe happened to be just right to support life. Any change in the gravitational constant or change in the magnetic force would result in a barren, lifeless universe. So tell me, what are the odds that this universe would happen to be tailored just right for life to exist?"

"I have no idea," I answered, figuring the odds were impossibly small.

"The odds are one-hundred percent."

I was surprised by Koizumi's answer. "What do you mean? Are you saying that this universe was guaranteed to exist the way it does?"

"Think about it. If there exists an infinite number of universes with infinite possibilities, then the odds that at least one of those universes would happen to be exactly like ours are virtually certain. This universe, and every universe that has ever existed, are the result of a coincidence. A coincidence that was guaranteed to occur simply because there exists enough universes that it would be impossible that none of them are exactly like ours."

"So is there some kind of point you're trying to make?" I asked.

Koizumi chuckled. "Not necessarily. It's possible that I'm completely wrong. Heck, if "M Theory" is ever debunked, my theory falls flat on its face. I just find it interesting to think about."

I had become a little overwhelmed by everything Koizumi had told me. I couldn't take much more. This was all far deeper than I ever wanted to think. I had enough to think about as it was. Why couldn't he ever talk about something that didn't make me want to nail a stake into my brain? How does he come up with this stuff, anyway? Does he sit at home all day meditating on it, hoping to achieve enlightenment? Does he hope to reach Nirvana and forever escape this plane of existence? There was no way for me to know, nor did I really want to know. In any case, I decided to let him know that I'd had enough.

"Look, Koizumi, we should probably put this on hold. What time is it?"

Koizumi looked at his watch before answering. "You're right. It's about time that we head back. We wouldn't want to keep Suzumiya-san waiting. To be honest, there was one more piece to my theory, but I guess that can wait. We should get moving."

It was then that Koizumi and I began to hustle back to the hotel to meet up with the girls.

I am so pissed right now! You may be asking why. Well I'll gladly tell you. It's because when Koizumi and I finally met up with Haruhi, we discovered that the three of them were all carrying several shopping bags. In other words, while Koizumi and I were walking all over the city like idiots, the girls were having a grand old time shopping.

Apparently sensing my exasperation, Haruhi had a response prepared. "While the three of us were going about our search, we

discovered that we were short on supplies, so we went out to buy them."

Do you honestly expect me to believe that?! Just what are in those bags anyway?

Haruhi turned away from me and crossed her arms. "None of your business!"

Growing increasingly suspicious, I look at the other two girls. Nagato merely stared stoically at me while Asahina-san put a finger in front of her lips and winked. "Sorry, Kyon-kun. It's a secret."

So what? I'm supposed to believe that these "supplies" are apparently "secret?" Just what the hell is Haruhi planning, anyway?

Haruhi turned to Koizumi, obviously trying to change the subject. "Did you two find anything?"

"I'm most sorry, Suzumiya-san," said Koizumi regretfully. "We failed to find any mysterious phenomenon."

Did you really think we'd find anything? I'm certain we could tear this city apart from head to toe and never find a thing even remotely mysterious.

Haruhi appeared unconcerned by our failure. "It's okay. We still have all day tomorrow to find something, but for now we should head in. It's getting late and I'm sure everyone here could use some rest."

That's probably the most intelligent thing you've said all day. Finally, I can relax.

The five of us finally entered the hotel and made our way to our rooms. I was glad to finally put down our useless equipment before I went to lie on my bed. I was exhausted by now and wanted to get some sleep. Unfortunately, I knew that going to sleep would be next to impossible no matter how wore out I was. The thoughts of the last

week all came back to me. The fact that I was going to be kicked out the day after this trip was over, the apparently bad thing that was supposed to happen according to Asahina-san (Big), and the highly likely fact that Haruhi was planning to confess sometime during this trip. All of these things were enormous problems that I had no idea how to solve. All I was given were two extremely vague clues that I was having trouble remembering at the moment. It's official. The world was doomed.

I was soon roused from this thought when I heard a knocking at my door. Koizumi was quick to answer it, and I soon discovered that it was Haruhi, along with Nagato and Asahina-san.

"Mind if we come in?" asked Haruhi in a tone that clearly said "We're coming in regardless of whether you wanted us to or not."

"Not at all," answered Koizumi predictably as he motioned the three of them in. "Make yourselves comfortable."

I forced myself to sit up as the three girls invaded our room. "What are you doing here?"

Haruhi raised an eyebrow at my question. "What? We just want to hang out."

"Why can't you hang out in your room?"

Haruhi gave me a sour look before answering, leaning toward me with her hand at her hips. "Because our room has less space in it due to us having to add an extra bed for Yuki. What's your problem anyway?"

Realizing that I really didn't want to start a fight, I sighed deeply and rubbed my eyes. "Nothing, I'm just tired."

"Don't tell me you're thinking of going to sleep already! It's not even that late yet! We have the whole night to ourselves! We should be making the most of it!"

"What exactly do you expect us to do all night?"

Haruhi blinked for a bit before putting her hand on her chin. She then snapped her fingers excitedly. "Well, for starters, we should order some food! I'm starving!" She then raised her hand in the air triumphantly. "Let's get some room service!"

After she said that, we went ahead and ordered some meals for everyone. Apparently, the TV was the device we had to use in order to make our orders. Once everyone had completed their order, we had to wait about a half-an-hour for the food to arrive. When it did, I was in for another surprise.

Koizumi opened the door after the knock, revealing none other than Arakawa-san and Mori-san, both dressed in uniforms standard to those who worked for the hotel. They had a cart with them with all the food we ordered.

Haruhi was quite surprised to see them. "Arakawa-san! Mori-san! What are you doing here?"

The both of them bowed before Arakawa-san answered. "The both of us are currently under the employ of this hotel."

"But I thought you two worked as a maid and a butler?" said Haruhi, a bit confused.

"Our last contract had expired recently," said Mori-san. "And we needed some work while we waited for the next client to require our services."

Koizumi then interjected. "I found out that the both of them were recently out of work, so I put the good word in for them so they could work here in the mean time."

"And we are very thankful for it," said Mori-san.

I already knew that everything they were saying was a bunch of bull crap. I'd been aware that Arakawa-san and Mori-san were members of Koizumi's Organization for a while now. No doubt that said Organization likely owned this hotel. Haruhi, on the other hand, was completely ignorant of this fact and merely smiled cheerfully. "Well that's good. At least we know that the service will be excellent!"

"It is an honor to serve you," said Arakawa-san politely as he and Mori-san began to serve everyone their meals. When everyone had everything they had ordered, the two of them took the cart out of the room and began to leave.

"If you need anything else, do not be afraid to ask," said Arakawa-san as they bowed one last time before closing the door.

While the girls began to chow down, I leaned up again Koizumi to speak to him quietly. "I take it that your buddies decided to tag along on the trip?"

"I must apologize for not saying anything earlier," whispered Koizumi. "Although you probably suspected as much, I assume. There have been other members of the Organization that have been keeping an eye on Suzumiya-san during this trip."

"Are the Tamaru brothers around as well?"

"Well, I'll just say that if you happen to spot a couple of police officers that look exactly like them, it's probably just a coincidence," said Koizumi, obviously joking.

I decided to drop the subject and began eating my meal. To tell the truth, my mood had lowered my appetite all day, but by now I was hungry enough to eat anyway.

While all of us were eating, Haruhi began to look around the room. "Shoot! I need something to drink! Where do we find something to drink around here?" She then began to look around the room for a means to quench her thirst. I decided not to pay too much attention

to her until she said something that almost made me spit out my food.

"Hey! A mini-bar!"

I turned immediately towards Haruhi to discover that she was hunched over what I had thought was a mini-refrigerator. It turns out that I was wrong, and it was in fact a storage container for various types of alcohol. It was exactly what Haruhi said it was. A mini-bar.

Haruhi appeared apprehensive about what was contained within the mini-bar. No doubt she remembered what happened the last time we all got drunk. After Haruhi and I consumed an excessive amount of wine during our summer trip on the island, we were rudely awakened with horrible hangovers the next morning. It was then that Haruhi declared that the consumption of alcohol was illegal for all members of the Brigade. Something told me, however, that she was strongly reconsidering that declaration.

Knowing that, I decided to speak up. "Are you going to drink any of it? I thought alcohol was banned for us."

"I know," said Haruhi as she continued to stared down the drinks anxiously. It was then that she took one last deep breath before she reached out and grabbed a six-pack of beer. "Why not? This is an important event anyway. Besides, it's been almost a year since the last time we drank. I think we own it to ourselves to celebrate! As Brigade Chief, I'm officially repealing the ban on alcohol!"

What's the point of having a ban on anything if you could just repeal it whenever you feel like it? And by the way, you do realize that we're not on some deserted island now, right? I'm pretty sure it's illegal for all of us to drink here… except for Asahina-san, maybe… how old is she now anyway? Who am I kidding? Since this hotel is owned and operated by Koizumi esper buddies, Haruhi could practically get away with murder.

Haruhi began to pull the individual cans off of the rings. She then tossed one my direction. "Catch!"

Despite not really being ready for it, I managed to catch the can after bobbling it around a bit. "What are you doing? I didn't ask for one."

"You need to loosen up," said Haruhi as she took another can off the ring. She then looked at Koizumi while holding the can up. "Want one?"

Koizumi appeared reluctant to agree. "… Sure."

After tossing one to Koizumi, Haruhi held another can towards Nagato. "Want one too, Yuki-chan?"

Nagato stared at the can of beer briefly before she methodically grabbed it from Haruhi's hand.

After that, Haruhi held out one more towards Asahina-san. "You take one too, Mikuru-chan!"

Asahina-san appeared the most hesitant to take the beer. "I… I don't know of I should. You know that alcohol doesn't agree with me."

"Come on, Mikuru-chan," pleaded Haruhi as she wrapped her arms around the time traveler. "Don't be such a party pooper. Surely you can handle one beer."

Asahina-san whimpered a little bit before swallowing and reaching for the beer. "O… okay. I guess one isn't so bad."

"That's the spirit! Let's party our brains out!" It was then that Haruhi took a can for herself and opened it. She then took a large swig from it before exhaling in satisfaction. "That's the stuff! Come on everyone! Drink up!"

Nagato was the first to comply, opening the can immediately and downing the whole can in one long chug.

"Wow, look at you go, Yuki-chan!" screamed Haruhi excitedly. "Now there's someone who knows how to party! Come on, everyone! No time like that present!"

Koizumi was next to open his beer and take a sip. Asahina-san also reluctantly opened her can and took a small sip, grimacing a bit afterward. At this point, I was the only one who hadn't opened my beer yet.

"What are you waiting for, Kyon?" asked Haruhi impatiently at she took another sip. "Hurry up and drink it!"

Stared down at the can. The memories of what happened last time I'd gotten drunk had faded quite a bit since it happened, and I could feel that my apprehension was also fading. It was then that I made a decision. Why the hell not? A lot of people drink to forget about their problems. Maybe for one night I could do the same. I then opened the can and took my first sip of beer. I was surprised by how terrible the taste was. "Is this what beer is supposed to taste like?"

"Of course, dummy!" said Haruhi as she took another sip. "What did you think beer tasted like?"

"I have no idea," I answered before taking another sip. Compared to the wine I drank last time I got drunk, beer wasn't nearly as easy to drink. "You act like you've tasted one before."

Haruhi nodded. "I had a sip of one of my dad's beers one time when he wasn't looking. It's not that bad."

I shook my head a bit before taking another sip. I decided to try my best to drink it down as quickly as I could. I figured the less time it took to get it down, the less I'd have to taste it.

It was at this point that everyone also joined in on trying to finish their beers, with the exception of Koizumi, who seemed content on taking his time with his. When Haruhi polished off her can, she turned back towards the mini-bar again to find something else to drink.

"Maybe we should try something stronger," said Haruhi as she began to try to decide between a bottle of sake or a bottle of whiskey. "Hmm, since I've never tried it before." She then grabbed the bottle of whiskey and grabbed a couple shot glasses. "Who else wants to try it?"

I reluctantly decided to join in and took the other shot glass. Haruhi poured her shot first before pouring mine as well. "Are you ready, Kyon?"

"You go first," I said, not really sure what to expect from the drink. I'd heard that hard liquors were pretty harsh to drink down.

"Baby," responded Haruhi as she looked at her shot glass on last time before drinking it down. Her face contorted violently before she began to cough. "Holy crap! It burns like hell!" She took a few more seconds to let the alcohol work its way down her esophagus. "Wow! That was rough! Your turn, Kyon! Do it!"

Seeing Haruhi's reaction to drinking the stuff did little to bolster my confidence. I began to stare down the small glass of brown liquid, swirling it a bit as I worked up the courage to drink it.

"Quit stalling! The faster you drink it down, the better it'll be!" yelled Haruhi as she pointed directly at me.

Taking one last deep breath, I quickly put the glass to my lips. I soon discovered that whiskey was about the least pleasant thing I've ever put in my mouth, and that includes the dirt I used to put in my mouth when I was a young kid. It had a bitterness that was beyond description, and it burned in ways I couldn't believe a drink could. It was all I could do to force it down.

"There you go, Kyon! How was it?"

"How do you think?"

Haruhi laughed a bit before pouring another shot. "Who wants to go next? Why don't you go, Yuki-chan, since you've already finished your beer?"

Nagato took the shot of whiskey and downed it effortlessly. She didn't so much as flinch as she swallowed it down.

Haruhi was rather impressed. "Wow, Yuki-chan! I can't believe you did that! You must come from a long line of alcoholics! You should be more careful if that's the case!"

It was then that Haruhi began to look around for something. She then got up and headed for the door. "I'll be right back!" She was gone for about a minute before returning with several more shot glasses in hand. She must've collected them from the mini-bar in her room. "I wanted all of us to share a round together!"

After that, Haruhi went and poured five shots at once and passed them all around to each of the members. The thought of taking another shot of the stuff was less than exciting, but since I wanted to get drunk fast, I figured I could endure it. I could already begin to feel the effects of the beer and the shot that I drank. My joints and lips tingled ever so slightly, and I felt a little bit light headed.

"Let's make a toast!" suggested Haruhi as she held up her shot glass. "To the SOS Brigade! May we continue to accomplish great things together!"

Hearing her say that brought back a little bit of the pain of knowing that I would not be involved in any of those "great things" after this trip. I tried to ignore that feeling as everyone clinked their glasses together and took their drink, with the exception of Asahina-san.

"I… I don't think I should drink this. I'm already starting to feel a little tipsy."

Haruhi frowned at Asahina-san after finishing her shot. "Come on, Mikuru-chan. Surely you can handle one more drink. I know you're a

light weight, but this is a special occasion. Do it! Do it! Do it!"

Asahina-san stared down the drink nervously, perhaps more fearful of the drink's taste than its effects. After the bit of peer pressure from Haruhi, she finally gave in and quickly drunk the toxic brew. She gave a ridiculously cute grimace as she struggled to swallow it down. She coughed as well, obviously not enjoying the sensation it gave as it made its way to her stomach. "Yucky…"

"Alright!" cheered Haruhi. "Who wants another?!"

The party continued from there. Haruhi and I pounded down a couple more shots, while Nagato continued to drink the stuff like it was water. Just like the last time, no matter how much Nagato drank, she never seemed any different. Perhaps she was immune to its effects, but if that were the case, why bother? Never mind. Nagato could do whatever she wanted.

As for Koizumi, he decided not to drink any more and stated that he was okay as he was. I wondered if his responsibilities as part of the Organization required him not to drink an excessive amount of alcohol, or maybe he just doesn't like to drink. Either way, he was probably the only one who didn't go overboard.

Asahina-san on the other hand…

"Suzumiya-san… I'm really drunk…"

She was literally leaning on Haruhi's shoulder, as if she couldn't hold herself up. It had only been fifteen minutes since she took the shot of whiskey, and she was already completely smashed.

"Good." said Haruhi, who was also beginning to show the effects of inebriation. "I think you should take another shot."

"I don't know…" said Asahina-san as she stared out into space with a glassy-eyed expression. "I think it'd be too much."

"We'll never know unless we try," said Haruhi as she began to pour another shot for her.

However, before Haruhi could give the drink to her, Asahina-san laid back and closed her eyes. "I'm gonna go sleepy now."

Haruhi stared at Asahina-san with a pout before pointing directly at her. "Yooouuuu suck, Mikuru-chan!" She then turns towards the plate that Asahina-san was eating from. "As punishment, I'm gonna eat your food!" She then proceeds to scarf her face down on whatever was left on Asahina-san's plate.

After some more time had passed, Koizumi eventually offered to bring Asahina-san back to her room, stating that she'd had enough. Not long after that, Nagato also got up and returned to her room as well. This meant that it was only Haruhi and I. By now, we had both drunken enough to be legally intoxicated. The familiar sensation that being drunk gave had returned. My entire face was tingling now and my vision was hazy. I felt… surprisingly euphoric. Too bad I had to go to the bathroom once every ten minutes.

Haruhi was laying down on what was supposed to be my bed, her limbs sprawled out in several directions. "Sooooo drunk…"

"Yup," I said, not really wanting to move even though I was technically stealing Koizumi's bed. "Feels pretty good."

Haruhi rolled over onto her stomach to face me. She stared me down with a glassy-eyed expression. "We should do this more often."

"Do you think we'd get away with it?" I asked. Normally in my sober state of mind I would've rejected the idea of drinking all the time, but since my better judgment was long gone now, the idea seemed pretty good.

Haruhi got up onto her hands and knees and answered excitedly. "Maybe we could… hey, is Tsuruya eighteen yet?! Maybe we'll have

her buy it and we can just drink at her place."

"Yeah…" I said in a barely coherent manner.

"She's rich an' stuff, so… like… she can totally get away with that! Rich people can get away with anything!"

"Yeah…"

"Are you listenin', Kyon? You… you need to listen. This is important. You hear me?"

"I hear you…"

Haruhi began to look around the room, almost looking confused. "Where'd everyone go?" She then crossed her arms and pouted. "Why are they all gone? We're supposed to be partying. Don't they realize how important this is?"

When I realized that Koizumi hadn't returned from bring Asahina-san to her room, I became suspicious myself. "What does Koizumi think he's doin'?"

"I don't know, but…" She then stood up from the bed in an awkward fashion, her balance seriously compromised. "They… they all… need to know that doing things together as a Brigade is important. As their Brigade Chief…" Haruhi took a few steps towards me and leaned in a little. "It's my job to keep an eye on all of you. You know what I'm saying? I… I have to make sure you're okay… cause I love you guys like my own family. I'd do anything for any of you. You guys are like the brothers and sisters I never had… you know?"

"Yeah… I know…" I said while clumsily pointing back at Haruhi. "Family's important."

"Yes! Every one of you! I love you all! No matter what! I love… you…"

Even in drunken state, I heart my heart racing the moment she said that.

And almost immediately Haruhi continued with what she was saying, as if trying to cover her tracks. "… I love Mikuru-chan. I love Yuki-chan, and I love Koizumi-kun. I love you all. Don't you ever forget that!"

I was still reeling from her statement a bit earlier, so I didn't immediately response. "… Yeah…"

"You're not listenin' are you, Kyon?" asked Haruhi in a tone that sounded almost offended. "You… you need to listen. This is from the heart." Haruhi leaned in even closer, to the point where I could smell the alcohol coming from her breath.

For whatever reason, I began to gloss over the features of her face, reminding myself just how beautiful they were. The thought of kissing her then returned to my head, and with the alcohol flowing through my veins, the inhibitions that would normally pop up whenever this desire would come were virtually non-existent. I realized that if she came any closer that I was going to go for it. I wanted to so badly.

Just before I was given the chance, though, Haruhi's cell phone rang. A puzzled expression came over Haruhi as she straightened up and reached into her pocket. When she looked at her cell phone to see who was calling, her eyes widened in horror. She then immediately looked at me. "It's my parents. Why are they calling? They've never called before."

As the phone continued to ring, I reflected on how badly this situation could be. Haruhi was drunk, and if she wasn't careful, they would find out. In the past, when they still thought that she was part of the Literary Club, they likely never felt that they need to call during a trip. But now that they knew better, they likely realized that their daughter could not necessary be trusted, and did what any rational parent would do.

Haruhi was now nearly in a drunken panic. "What should I do? Should I answer it?"

I had no answer for her. I had zero experience with dealing with situations like these. All I could do was shrug. It was like one of those scenes out of a bad comedy movie.

Haruhi looked at the phone once again as it continued to ring. She then reluctantly put her thumb on the send button and pressed it before putting the phone to her ear. "Hello? Hi mom… I'm okay…"

It was obviously from my end that she was trying painfully hard to hide the fact that she was drunk. It was actually really funny watching her like this, her glassy-eyed expression staring out into space while she talked with her mother. I wondered if she suspected anything.

"… Nope… We're all okay. Couldn't be better… yep… we walked all over that place and didn't find anything. Don' you worry, though, we're gonna find somethin'. Oh… no not yet. That's tomorrow…" Her eyes then darted at me for a second before quickly looking away. "… Don't worry… yeah… oh, dad wants to talk? Okay…"

Now we're really screwed. Despite Haruhi's attempt, anyone listening carefully could easily make out the slurring in her speech, and her father was a lot more perceptive than most. I couldn't help but laugh. I knew I shouldn't, but my drunken state made it so I wasn't thinking anything I was doing through.

Haruhi continued her valiant effort to fool her parents. "Hi, dad… I'm good… we're havin' fun… don't worry, I got everythin' under control… What? Oh…" She then leaned towards me with her hand over the phone before whispering. "He wants to talk to you."

Great! Now I had to try and hide the fact that I was drunk, and I had serious doubts that I could do it as well as Haruhi had. I hesitantly went and grabbed the phone before answering it. "Hello?"

"Are you guys alright?" asked Oruki in a suspicious tone.

Here goes nothing… "Yup… We're good."

Oruki paused a bit before continuing. "I wanted to talk to you about something."

"Okay…" I said, still trying as hard as I could to hide my intoxication.

"You remember telling me about that really bad thing that was supposed to happen, right?"

I paused a bit to figure out what he was talking about. "… yeah…"

"Has that bad thing happened yet?" His voice was full of concern.

"No…" I answered, not really sure what else to say.

"I see…"

"Don't… worry, Oruki… san. I'll take care of everythin'… Okay?"

I heard another pause from him. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah… I'm awesome…" Crap, I was totally busted.

"Put my daughter back on," demanded Oruki.

I handed the phone back to Haruhi, fairly certain that I screwed up. I listened to Haruhi as she talked to her father.

"Yeah? Uh… he's just tired… uh huh… yeah… well, I'm getting tired, too… okay… goodnight dad… bye." She then shut her phone off, a look of relief on her face. "You think they knew?"

"I don't know," I replied, hoping for the best.

"Why'd he want to talk to you, anyway?" asked Haruhi with a drunken suspicion.

It took me a few seconds to come up with a sufficient lie. "He… he just wanted to be sure nothin' was goin' on."

"Oh," said Haruhi before she decided to plop herself diagonally on the bed I was laying on. "That was scary. Do you know what my dad would do to us if he knew?"

"He would kill us… especially me," I said. "Not like it matters for me though, cause I…" Crap! I almost let it slip!

"Cause what?" asked Haruhi.

Not good. What could I say? I couldn't tell her now. Even in my drunken state, I knew it was a horrible idea to tell Haruhi the truth about me leaving after this trip. I tried desperately to get out of telling her. "Cause… I need another drink…"

Fortunately, my diversionary tactic worked. Haruhi rolled onto her belly and pointed at me excitedly. "Good idea! More alcohol now!"

It was then that Haruhi and I polished off not one, but two more shots of whiskey each, all but completely emptying the bottle. In hindsight, it was a huge mistake. Before long, I was well beyond the realm of drunkenness and into the realm of being completely smashed.

Haruhi was also in the same boat, barely able to talk straight by this point. "I can' believe we almost drank all of it… I should finish it…"

"You've had too much already…" I said, starting to feel some dizziness hit me.

"No I haven'," said Haruhi as she tried to stand up. Her balance was all but completely shot at this point, and she was barely able to stand straight. "I… I could totally pass for being sober. I fooled my parents… right? Watch this…" She then attempts to stand on one foot. When I said "attempt," that was about all it was. Every time she tried, she would nearly fall over. She seemed undeterred by this though, as every time she nearly fell she would giggle a bit.

"I can tell…" I said with obvious drunken sarcasm.

Apparently, such sarcasm was lost to her in the state of mind she was in, as she continued as if she was doing fine. "See? I could totally do it. If I was pulled over while drivin', I could totally fool the police officer. I'd pass that drunken test easy." Her eyes widened in excitement. "Hey! We should totally practice the drunken test right now! That way when we finally start drivin', we can totally do it drunk an' not get caught!"

Of course, what she was saying was asininely stupid even by Haruhi's standards. However, I wasn't in the state of mind I needed to be in order to criticize her.

Haruhi began to motion me to get up. "Come on, Kyon! Let's practice! We can do it!"

I finally decide to get up off the bed. Unfortunately, I nearly fell over just from trying to get up. The both of us cracked up just from watching me fumble my way to where I was supposed to stand.

When I finally got into position, Haruhi held her hands out from her sides and began to try and balance on one foot again. "You… you gotta do it like this… You close your eyes and stand on one foot while you try to touch your nose." Haruhi attempted to demonstrate, but the fact that she soon fell on the floor was evidence that she failed miserably. Neither of us seemed to have cared as we just laughed away like idiots.

After Haruhi made it to her feet again, I went and put my hands out to attempt it. "My turn…" I barely lasted a second before I began to fall as well, only this time Haruhi tried to stop my fall by grabbing me. Her efforts to rescue me failed, and we both fell to the floor again, laughing our asses off. The laughing continued for a few more seconds before it stopped when we realized something…

… Haruhi was lying right on top of me…

Haruhi and I looked deeply into each other's eye… well… about as deeply as we could in our condition. We did this for a few seconds before Haruhi said something that took me by surprise.

"… You're kinda hot…"

I felt my eyes widen when I heard this. I knew even in my drunken state that she would never say anything like that while sober. I wasn't sure how I felt about it, as I wasn't in my right state of mind at that point.

However, just as I was about to say something, Haruhi spoke again. "… Just kiddin'…" It seemed that maybe Haruhi realized what she said and wanted to take it back. She then got off of me and looked away. "… Why would I say something like that? I should know better…"

I was rather annoyed by her statement, and as I sat up, I decided to get back at her. "Yeah… well… you're kinda hot…"

Haruhi smile smugly when I said that. "Oh really? Well… I knew that already…"

"… Just kidding… you're not hot at all!"

Haruhi stared drunken daggers at me when I said that. "Damn you, Kyon! You're gonna pay for that!" She then jump at me and began to wrestle with me.

For whatever reason, I started laughing again as she made attempts to strangle me, as if the idea that I pissed her off this much was hilarious. To be honest, I didn't think she really wanted to hurt me, and our wrestling got pretty playful after a while. I had to admit that even as smashed as she was, she was a formidable opponent. Not that I was much of an opponent, either, since I was easily as drunk as she was.

Unfortunately, our fun ended when she pushed me back, and I fell towards the desk nearby. My head smacked against the corner hard. Even in my desensitized state, it hurt like crazy.

Haruhi put her hand to her face and gasped in horror when she saw me hit the desk. "Oh my god! Are you okay?!"

"Ow…" was all I could say for a few seconds while I waited for the pain to subside for a bit. At this point, I had enough. I decided it was time to pack it in for the night. "I'm gonna lay down now." I then slowly crawled my way onto my bed.

"Sorry…" was the last thing I heard Haruhi say before I made it to my pillow. I couldn't remember anything else after that. I was soon passed out.

Overall, that night was a lot of fun, but little did I know that the next two days would test my will to its very limits. It would be a time I would never forget…

All I can say is that I hope this chapter was worth the wait. I promise that the next chapter will not take nearly as long to finish, even though it will be another difficult chapter to write.

Anyway, until next time, see ya!

Chapter 25

I want to apologize for the delay of this chapter. I know I used to update very quickly, but I've had a very nasty case of writer's block for a while. This was partly due to my anxiety caused by wanting to make sure the setting in Kyoto was described right. Ultimately, I don't know if I did a good job, but I hope I did.

Fortunately, this chapter is a very important one that may or may not be the chapter many of you guys have been waiting for. *wink*

It was a tough chapter to write, but I think it was plenty worth it. Hope all of you agree as well

Anyway, onward!!!

Chapter 25

My face itched. I wondered why it did. Something's on it. I needed to get it off. I put my hand on my face and felt something weird. I picked it off and tossed it over the side of my bed. There was more. I picked some more off my face. I did this for a full minute before a realization dawned on me…

What the hell was I picking off my face?

I then opened my eyes… or eye to be exact. The reason for this was because the other one was sealed shut. I put my whole hand on my face and became freaked out. In almost a panic, I sat up and tried to go to the bathroom. I used the word "tried" because my balance was still screwed up and I almost fell again.

When I finally made it into the bathroom, I was finally able to figure out what the hell was wrong with me.

Apparently I threw up all over my face. All the partially digested food I ate last night was now sticking to the left side of my head, making it impossible for me to open my eye. Yes, it was every bit as disgusting as it sounded.

When I realized what had happened, my stomach began to churn. Clearly my stomach had yet to have recovered from last night, and it had more to get rid of. I opened the toilet bowl and let out some more of whatever was still in my stomach. It was then that I realized just how terrible I had felt. It was quite possibly the worst hangover I'd had yet.

The first thing I decided to do was take a shower. I removed my ruined clothes and stepped in. Fortunately, the water easily washed away the gunk on my face and within a few minutes I was a new man… Okay, that was a lie. I still felt like absolute crap, and I found a nasty welt on the back of my head that hurt like hell. Where the heck did that come from?

I dried myself off and wrapped a towel around my waist as I went to open the bathroom door. When I opened it, I searched around the room for where I left my suitcase. It was while I looked around that I noticed something wrong…

Haruhi was still in my room.

There she was, laying on what was supposed to be Koizumi's bed, still out like a light. Crap! What the hell was she still doing here?!

I quickly bolted back into the bathroom to avoid having to be seen in nothing but a towel. When I closed the door, I leaned against it and scowled a bit, unhappy with the current situation. I forgot about the welt on the back of my head and bumped it on the door, smarting something fierce. Okay, now I was really getting fed up. Just what the hell happened last night? The last thing I remembered was… Haruhi's parents calling. Dammit! I remember talking to that bastard Oruki, too. Did he know that we were drunk? I really hope not. He'd probably kill me the next time I met him.

Thanks to the fact that Haruhi was still in my room, I couldn't go out there to fetch my clothes without risking her waking up and seeing me practically naked. I opened the door slightly to check on her. She didn't look like she was close to waking up, and the clock between the beds said it was almost nine. I realized that I didn't have much of a choice but to risk getting my clothes and hope that she didn't wake up. This all wouldn't have been so bad if I didn't feel so horrible. The consolation to all this was the fact that Haruhi was likely to feel just as bad if not worse when she finally woke up. Serves her right. Then again, did I really want to deal with a hung over Haruhi? Great… more problems to think about.

I slowly left the bathroom and made my way towards my suitcase as quietly as I could. I carefully opened it up and took out a clean outfit for the day, picking out something light since I remembered that the day was supposed to be pretty warm. Just as I gathered it up, I heard a snort coming from Haruhi. I turn to see her moving. No! I was frozen stiff, not sure if I should run or hide. It was when Haruhi merely rolled over and went back to sleep that I felt relieved. False alarm. I got up and darted back into the bathroom as quickly as possible. Knowing that I was free from any prying eyes, I got dressed as quickly as I could before exiting the bathroom.

Just as I came out, I found Haruhi finally rousing from her drunken rest. Her face looked miserable, and it was obviously that she was feeling less than one-hundred percent.

"I feel like craaaaaaaaaaaap…" said Haruhi as she put her hands on her forehead. She then looked at the clock to see what time it was. As soon as she did, she appeared slightly distraught. "Are you kidding me? We're late!"

Late for what? The only thing we're planning on doing was walking around the city like idiots again.

Haruhi gave me a nasty glare before responding. "Idiot! You may be fine with lying around and doing nothing, but we have some

important things to do today! How can you only think of yourself like that?!"

Instead of wasting time yelling at me, why don't you go back to your room and get ready?!

I then watched as Haruhi eyed the small pile of vomit that was on my bed. Soon after that, Haruhi began to gag and soon bolted towards the bathroom. I tried my best not to think about the noises that came from there shortly after that. Yep, last night was a huge mistake alright. At least the mess I made was room service's problem to deal with.

When Haruhi was done… relieving her stomach, she left the bathroom and made her way out of my room. About a minute later, Koizumi returned to our room, trying to rub the sleep from his eyes.

It was then that my mood soured just a bit more. It didn't take me long before I figured out that he spent the entire night sleeping in the girls' room, with a passed out Asahina-san. What the hell were you doing, you bastard?

As if sensing my suspicion, Koizumi scratched the back of his head and smiled sheepishly. "Well, after I went and took Asahina-san back to her room, I laid her down on her bed. I was concerned about her condition, so I decided to sit down and keep an eye on her. I guess the drinks I had last night made me sleepy, because I soon fell asleep after that. I only just woke up when Suzumiya-san returned to her room."

Yeah, right…

He began to look around the room with that annoying smile of his. "It looks like you and Suzumiya-san had plenty of fun in here last night."

The way he said that… "Nothing happened!"

Koizumi merely shrugged innocently. "I didn't say anything like that."

I decided that I felt too crappy right now to want to stick around in my room, especially with him. "Well, while you're getting ready, I'm going down stairs. Just tell Haruhi that I'm waiting down in the lobby."

I did exactly as I said I would, making my way down to the lobby and taking a seat down there. I closed my eyes and leaned my head back to rest a bit more, hoping it would make me feel a little better. I was there for what felt like half an hour before I felt something heavy hit my stomach, jolting me out of my rest. I soon realized that it was my pack of useless "supplies" that I was now holding.

"Forget something?" asked Haruhi with a hint of venom. I noticed that everyone else was also ready and carrying their own stuff. As expected, Nagato was her completely usual self without a trace of a hangover. So not fair. Asahina-san looked a bit groggy although she was definitely in better shape than Haruhi and I.

"Get up already, and let's go!" commanded Haruhi. "We're going to get breakfast!"

How can you possibly eat right now? Just the thought of food makes me want to puke again.

"Perhaps a meal will help settle your stomach," suggested Koizumi.

"Besides, I was going to make you run to the store and get some stomach and headache medicine while we waited for our food, anyway!" commanded Haruhi.

"Why do I have to do it?" I asked bitterly.

"Because it's you're fault that I feel so crappy right now!" yelled Haruhi with her hand at her hips. "It was your idea to drink even more after we were already drunk!"

What? I don't remember that! Are you saying that you actually remember what happened all of last night? Never mind. "Well you were the one that suggested that we drink in the first place."

"And we'd have been fine if we'd kept it to moderation," said Haruhi as she turned away from me. "But seeing as some people can't control themselves, I realize now that the ban on alcohol must be reinstated!"

Who here is surprised by this announcement? And who else thinks that it'll be less than a year before she lifts this ban again? Sorry, I'm not taking bets…

Haruhi then points at Nagato. "I mean, look at her. She drank more than either of us, and she's perfectly fine. If we don't put an end to such behavior, she'll develop a drinking problem for sure!"

I don't think drinking could ever be a problem for Nagato, as I don't think human interfaces can become addicted to anything, but you wouldn't know that, would you?

Ultimately, I accepted my fate and decided to go and look for a local drugstore while the others ordered their food. Finding a drugstore was going to be a bit of a problem, however, as I was far from familiar with the local area. It also didn't help that the brightness of the sun only made it worse for my head. I had to walk several blocks before I eventually found a convenience store. Although I knew it wasn't the ideal place to find medication, I had hoped that I could find what I needed there.

I was fortunate that I was able to locate the head and stomach medicine quickly enough, and I made my way to the front of the counter to pay for it. I ignored the snarky comment made by the store owner, who was obviously able to piece together why I was buying the stuff, and I made my way back to the restaurant. While walking there, I wasted no time in talking both medications, hoping both of them would start working fast. Perhaps, I should ask Nagato for some help if these don't do the trick. I'd have to be subtle about though. If Haruhi caught Nagato biting my wrist, no doubt that she would get the wrong idea.

It didn't take long for me to spot the group when I entered the restaurant. There was an open seat next to Koizumi and Haruhi which I took.

"Did you get it?" asked Haruhi, who was still far from being a radiant beam of brightness.

I said nothing and handed her the medication. She took both and swallowed them down immediately. She took what was left and put it in her bag.

"What did you order for me?" I asked.

"We took the liberty of ordering you eggs and toast," answered Koizumi. "I hope that's adequate?"

"It's fine," I said as I leaned onto my hand. I had doubts that I could stomach much more than that.

Haruhi went and pulled out a map of the city while we were waiting. "We might as well go over our plans for today while we can. We've already wasted enough time." Despite the clear lack of enthusiasm that she felt, Haruhi began her reminder of what was expected of us today.

"As you guys should know, we'll be searching Areas Three and Four during the first half of the day while we later search Areas Five and Six during the second half of the day." She then took a pen from her bag and drew some circles on two different locations on the map. "Those searching Area Three will consist of myself, Yuki-chan and Kyon. We will spend our time in eastern Kyoto. Koizumi-kun and Mikuru-chan will search the western side."

She then drew two more circles in what was obviously northern and southern Kyoto. "During the second half of the day, Kyon and I will proceed to the north end of Kyoto while the rest of you proceed to the south. Are there any questions?"

None of us said a word, which was probably a good thing. I figured that all I needed to do was follow Haruhi around all day, not that it would be easy. I just hoped that this day didn't drag…

I then looked carefully at the circle on the map that was supposed to represent northern Kyoto. I then remembered that Haruhi and I were going to be alone during that segment of the expedition. That was the moment that made me worried. My heart began to race again, and my head started to pound. I was sure that was when Haruhi was…

I was jolted from my train of thought when the waitress arrived to hand us our breakfast. I took my plate and began to eat in earnest. I knew that one thing was for sure. This day was going to test me.

The first stop for our group was the Fushimi Inari Shine, the most famous of all the shines in the world dedicated to Inari, the goddess of rice, agriculture and… fertility. Unfortunately, that was about as much as I cared to know about the place at the time, as my hangover was still quite overpowering. What made it worse was the fact that even though Nagato was with this group, at no point was it remotely possible for me to ask for her assistance. Why? Because Haruhi was sure to make it so all three of us were together at all times. Dammit, that's annoying. And you know what makes this all worse? I'm carrying most of Haruhi's and Nagato's stuff. Did you really expect any less?

We visited that main area of the shrine, doing our best to take in the sights, although it was obvious that none of us were really looking for anything out of the ordinary. There were a ton of fox statues all over the place, since the goddess apparently had a fox for a messenger. A few of the more impressive ones were given the honor of having Haruhi taking a picture of them.

However, what was probably the most impressive part of the place we were at were the countless number of torii gates that were positioned one after another over the various trails that meandered

around the area. The total time it took to walk the whole distance? Two hours! Please tell me that Haruhi was planning on us walking the entire distance.

"Of course we're not walking the whole thing!" yelled Haruhi. "We can't thanks to fact that we lost so much time this morning!"

You mean you seriously were going to walk this whole thing if we'd gotten up early enough? Did the alcohol you drank last night rot away the last vestiges of your brain?

"Idiot! Instead of complaining, you should be keeping an eye out for anything unusual!"

Like what? We're surrounded by torii gates from all angles. There's nothing to see no matter which way we look. And I still feel like absolute crap.

Haruhi didn't respond right away, deciding to sigh a bit and turn her head away. I turned behind me to look at Nagato. She was reading a book while following us the whole time, completely absorbed in whatever was contained within. Why the hell isn't Haruhi yelling at her? She's obviously not looking for anything. Not that Nagato necessarily needed her eyes to observe her surroundings. It's almost as if her eyes were for cosmetic purposes only. Then again, I didn't really want Nagato to be yelled at, either. I'd probably be a bit pissed off if she was.

It was then that Haruhi asked me something that surprised me a bit. "How's your head?"

At first, I missed the point of her question. "How do you think? My head is pounding like crazy."

"That's not what I meant, idiot!" exclaimed Haruhi in annoyance. "I meant the back of your head!"

Wait a minute. You mean you know about the welt that I have? Does that mean you actually remember what happened last night? How the hell is it that you can remember when I can't? Just what the hell happened to my head anyway?

"You don't remember?" asked Haruhi before she then turned her head away, looking somewhat embarrassed. "Y… you accidentally fell backwards and hit your head on the desk."

"Really," I replied, getting the feeling that she wasn't being completely honest with me. "Well, it hurts like hell."

Haruhi didn't reply to what I said, although I got the feeling that she was feeling a bit guilty. We were all silent for the next half an hour as we continued to walk the tremendous path aligned with the torii gates. I had to admit that the gates did a good job blocking out a lot of the sun light. Without the brightness of the sun to aggravate it, my head felt a slight bit better after a while.

I could only assume that Haruhi was beginning to get bored, since she started to talk to me, only it was a topic that caught me a bit off guard. "You know how these gates are used to mark the paths from sacred to non-sacred areas, right?"

"What about it?" I asked suspiciously.

"It's almost as if it marks a transition, you know?"

"So what if it does?" So what is her point?

"It get's me to wonder… if maybe having us walk this path… maybe it's telling us that we're about to transition into something different."

Why is she talking like this? Is she trying to tell me something? For some reason, I decided to respond back. "If you ask me, I'd rather if things didn't change. I kinda like things how they are now. I know that sometimes things have to change, but change can be hard."

Haruhi looked away, as if her mind was becoming burdened. "But… sometimes change can be a good thing… And what do you mean by what you said?"

I didn't answer her right away. Why? Because for some reason, I got a brief glimpse of Ryoko Asakura in my head again. The conversation we were having was way too reminiscent of the first time she almost killed me. My eyes began to dart around suspiciously, as if I had expected some unknown violent evil to attack me. I was then reminded that Nagato was still following close behind us, so there was little reason to believe that anything bad would happen.

I turned back to Haruhi, hoping that we could drop the subject. "Never mind what I was saying before. I was babbling. I'm not really in the mood to talk about deep subjects, anyway. When are we moving onto the next area?"

Haruhi went and looked at the clock on her cell phone. "You're right. We need to move on before lunch time. The next opening we see, we should leave and head to our next destination."

Shortly after she said that, we found a clearing in the path of gates that lead away from the path and towards the nearby city streets. It was so sudden that it made me wonder if… nah, it must've been a coincidence. Anyway, it took the path away from the torii gates and made our way towards the nearest bus stop.

Our next destination: The Kiyomizu-dera…

The Kiyomizu-dera (or Pure Water Temple) is widely considered to be the most famous site in all of Kyoto, perhaps even all of Japan. It's a massive temple, built at around 780 A.D. and remains associated with the Hosso sect of Japanese Buddhism even today. It was also up for consideration for being one of the new modern Seven Wonders of the World (it didn't make the final cut). How do I know all this? Because it was crammed down my throat by Haruhi

while we were riding the bus on the way there. Despite her efforts, I was so not in the mood for learning. In actuality, my mind was somewhat distracted on the way there by the sight of a police vehicle. Inside it, I spotted what appeared to be, you guessed it, the Tamaru Brothers. Great…

When we arrived, I was expecting there to be a great deal of people there, seeing as this was such a popular tourist attraction, but I found myself being a bit surprised to find that it was relatively sparsely populated that the time. I tried not to question this, but I had my suspicions that there were forces at work that were making the location unnaturally deserted.

As we moved about the premises, I noticed Haruhi's energy level and mood improving rapidly. It was almost as if her force of will alone was removing all the effects of the night of binge drinking we had not that long ago. It could be explained that her powers were actively removing the unpleasant symptoms (as I'm sure Koizumi would likely state), but I had the feeling that even without such powers, her tenacity would find a way.

The same could not be said for myself…

The first stop we made while at this place was the infamous "Love Rocks" that Taniguchi was kind enough to bring up before we left. Just as he said, there were two stones placed nearly twenty meters apart. I place my hand on my face in exasperation as I watched Haruhi quickly dart towards them when they came into view.

"Hey, Kyon! Do you know what these are?"

Yes. Yes I do. And please tell me you're not planning what I think you're planning?

"They say that if you're able to walk from one stone to the other with your eyes closed, you'll fall happily in love with whoever is the one you secretly desire." She then looked at both myself and Nagato,

that notorious million-watt smile of hers beaming at full power. "Let's give it a try!"

"I'll pass," I said immediately, wanting nothing to do with the damn rocks. Besides, it's just a stupid superstition anyway. I was tempted to ask her why she wanted to perform such a ritual to begin with, but I already knew the answer. It might have been fun to poke fun at her for doing this, but I couldn't muster the will.

Seemingly ignoring my comment, Haruhi positioned herself in front of the rock. "I'm going first!" She then closed her eyes and held her hands out, hoping that doing so would in some way aid her in being able to successfully navigate to her desire destination. I suspected that Haruhi would be able to reach the other rock without too much trouble, given her extraordinary sense of balance and otherwise unnatural level of talent. My suspicions were correct. Before long, her foot hit the other rock, causing her to jump in excitement.

"Alright! I did it!" she cheered loudly before running up to Nagato. "You do it, Yuki-chan.!"

Nagato's eyes lifted from the book for a moment and glanced at Haruhi and I. When she saw me shrug lightly, Nagato turned back to Haruhi and lightly nodded. After being given some quick instructions, Nagato lined herself up on the one rock, closed her eyes, and walked effortlessly towards the other rock. She walked so easily toward it that Haruhi started to become suspicious.

"You're not cheating are you? How are you doing that?"

As I said before, I seriously doubted that Nagato needed her eyes to complete this task. If it was the fact that she was able to perfectly calculate her path without looking, or if it was the fact that she can see without actually having her eyes open, I wouldn't be surprised either way.

Haruhi was quick to congratulate Nagato when she completed the walk as well. "Way to go, Yuki-chan! I wonder who your dream guy

is! Just remember that if you find him sometime soon, try not to let him get in the way of Brigade activities!" She then turned to me. "Your turn, Kyon."

Didn't I just say that I pass? What part of that didn't you understand?

"Come on, Kyon! Just do it already!" She then grabbed my shirt by the shoulder and began to shake me back and forth. "Do it! Do it! Do it! Do it! Do…"

"Okay! Okay!" I yelled in exasperation. I knew that this was stupid, and I still felt way too crappy to want to do it, but I figured it wasn't worth the aggravation. I positioned myself in front of the rock, closed my eyes, and began to carefully make my way towards the rock. It didn't take many steps before I found myself becoming disoriented, and I wasn't sure how many steps it would take to make it.

That wouldn't matter, though, because I soon felt something in the way of my one foot, tripping me up and causing me to fall forward on my face. It was only when I started to hear some laughter that I realized what had happened.

"That was… great!" gasped Haruhi as she doubled over in laughter. I figured out that she tripped me with her foot while I had my eyes closed.

"Very funny," I said sourly before retorting with a comment. "I guess I'll never find my true love now…"

Haruhi's laughter ended at that exact moment, and she looked a little worried for a half second before she responded. "Well… since you were tripped while you attempted it, I'll allow you another try."

"Forget it," I said as I got up and started to walk away, despite Haruhi's protests. Eventually, Haruhi let it go, making the excuse that it was a stupid superstition anyway. The next stop we made while we were still at the Kiyomizu-dera was underneath the main hall where there where three streams of water.

"According to the travel guide," said Haruhi. "Drinking from each of these streams will confer different properties. One will give you wisdom, one will give health, and the last will give longevity. You can only drink from two of them, though, or misfortune will befall you."

I knew immediately what I wanted to pick. I went to the stream that bestowed wisdom first, figuring that I was going to need a lot of it to make it through the rest of this horrible trip, and then I took a drink from the stream that bestowed health, hoping that would cure my hangover. Haruhi went and picked health and longevity, while Nagato picked wisdom and longevity. I could only guess that Haruhi avoided the wisdom stream simply because she felt she didn't need the extra wisdom (I couldn't disagree more, by the way). I was more curious about Nagato's decisions. I guess that since she was an interface, health concerns were a non-issue, so that's maybe the reason why she avoided that stream, but I also remembered Nagato mentioning something when I presented her with that love letter from Nakagawa (which was written by me and later accidentally read by Haruhi). She said that her "self-control mechanism" would unlikely remain functional for a period longer than ten year. It may not even last ten years. I wasn't sure what that meant exactly, but there was a possibility that Nagato's lifespan would not last as long as an ordinary person's. Did Nagato want to live longer? It would make sense, I suppose. I decided to stop thinking about the possibility for her life ending early. I had enough depressing things to worry about.

The final location that the three of us finally visited was the famous stage that many people could look over. I had to admit that the sight of looking at it was quite impressive. The structure stood nearly thirteen meters tall. I noticed that Haruhi appeared more enthusiastic than at any point today when she looked over at the scenery around the stage. Her enthusiasm dipped a bit when she looked down to see how high she was up.

"It's way too high…" said Haruhi with a pout.

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Have you heard of the saying 'to jump off the stage of Kiyomizu'?" she asked in a calm tone.

"What about it?"

"It means for someone to take that first step towards accomplishing one's goals," answer Haruhi with increasing eagerness. "I believe that all of us should always strive to move forward towards obtaining whatever it is we desire most. I had wanted to bring the whole Brigade here later so that we could all jump off the stage as a symbol of our commitment to meeting the goals of the Brigade!"

Have I ever told you that you're insane? Because it's true. Really… really true…

Haruhi frowned again as she looked down. "But it's way too high to do that."

That, and the fact that security here would probably never allow us to jump anyway would probably put a damper on your plans.

Haruhi went and looked in the travel guild again. After a few seconds, she appeared to find something interesting, as her face began to beam again. "Hey, Kyon! According to this, there have been two-hundred and thirty-four people that have jumped off the stage, and more than eighty-five percent of them have survived! Those are pretty good odds! Maybe we should try it anyway!"

I facepalmed upon hearing this. No, Haruhi. An eighty-five percent survival rate is not good odds. That means that out of the five of us, one of use will likely die. And since Asahina-san is likely the one with the lowest constitution score, she'd probably be the one to go. Words cannot express how mad I'd be if I lost my maid-wearing angel who brewed the sweetest of elixirs everyday after class. The whole idea is almost as stupid as jumping into a barrel and falling down Niagara Falls. The fact that a lot of people have done both only further destroys my faith in humanity.

"Geez, Kyon. I was only kidding," said Haruhi a bit harshly. "Of course I wouldn't do it. I'd never do anything that would put my Brigade in serious danger. You know that."

If only you knew the truth, Haruhi. If only…

Haruhi then looked at her cell phone to check the time. "We need to head back now. It's time for lunch."

With that, the three of us made our way towards the nearest bus stop. As we walked away, I noticed that Haruhi gave one last, long glance at the Kiyomizu-dera. I had wondered what she was thinking about when she did so, but I decided not to ask. I had the feeling she wouldn't tell me if I did.

When the group got together for lunch, I was unsurprised to find that Koizumi and Asahina-san had failed to find anything (it's doubtful that they even tried to look). Haruhi was unconcerned by this setback, however, stating that she was confident that we'd find something when we set off after lunch.

Unfortunately, I was reminded of the fact that the next time we split up, it would be Haruhi and I alone together. My heart began to race nervously at this fact, because I knew for sure that it was during this time period that Haruhi was finally going to confess to me. I was absolutely convinced of it. So great was my anxiety about this fact that I couldn't bear to eat my lunch. What was I going to do? I knew for a fact that the moment that she finally says the truth about her feelings that there would be no going back. Worst of all, she still doesn't know about the fact that I was leaving on Monday. How the hell could I tell her about that without upsetting her? And I still don't know how the hell I'm supposed to avoid this horrible catastrophe that Asahina-san (big) warned me about. Was it all because Haruhi finally confessed to me? Was that the reason? Was it caused by something I said, or was going to say? Was there anything I could say that wouldn't lead the world into inevitable peril? So many

questions, and I didn't have a single answer. However, there was one thing that I knew for certain…

I couldn't let Haruhi have the opportunity to confess to me. I had to find a way to avoid it…

Fortunately, I was roused from my day-dreaming state by the words of a certain, angelic time-traveler. "Kyon-kun, you don't look so good. Are you okay?"

I was startled by her words as I looked up at her. "Huh?"

"Asahina-san is right," said Koizumi. "You don't appear to be well. You're looking a bit pale, and you're sweating a lot."

I wiped my brow only to discover that I had indeed been sweating quite profusely. I had been so absorbed within my own thoughts that I hadn't noticed.

Haruhi went and put a hand on my forehead. "You don't feel warm. Are you okay?"

It was then that I was hit with a sudden bolt of inspiration. I realized that if I could fake not feeling well, I could get out of being alone with Haruhi, and she wouldn't get the opportunity to confess to me. It's not like I'd really have to try all that hard, either, since I still felt pretty crappy from the hangover.

"To be honest, I'm not feeling that great. My head is killing me." I then remembered the nasty welt on the back of my head and decided to use that. "I'm starting to wonder if that bump I got last night was worse than it seemed."

"Do you need to see a doctor?" asked Haruhi, her concern beginning to rise.

"No, I think I just need to lie down for a while," I replied, since I was worried that if I did see a doctor, they might figure out that I was

faking it.

Haruhi stared at me with a mixture of sternness and concern. She then made an announcement that I didn't want to hear. "Fine, then I'll take you back to you're room and keep an eye on you while you're resting. It's my responsibility that every one of my members is taken care of when they're not feeling well."

Crap! That's the exact opposite of what I wanted. I had to think of some excuse quickly to get her to change her mind. "You can't."

"Why not?! If you're not feeling well, I can't just leave you on your own!"

I probed my mind for a second for an excuse before finally coming up with one. "We still haven't found anything we can use against James Randi. We need to make sure that as many people as possible are looking or we might miss our chance. I don't want to be the reason why we come out of this trip empty-handed." I then darted a look towards Koizumi, trying to give him a non-verbal cue that I wanted him to help me out here.

Fortunately, Koizumi was as perceptive as ever, and he caught onto what I was trying to do. "I agree with him, Suzumiya-san. I think it's best that as many of us as possible are out there searching. We don't have much time before the convention tomorrow, and we must all search diligently if we are to succeed."

Haruhi took a deep breath before letting out an unpleasant sigh. I could tell that she really didn't want to leave me alone, but there was no way she could disagree with what Koizumi and I said without making it obvious that she had ulterior motives for this trip. A second later, she finally agreed. "Fine. We'll have you rest in your room while the rest of us continue our search." She then points at my nose before continuing. "But if you start to feel any worse, you better call us immediately!"

With that, I was off the hook. After lunch ended, the group walked me back to the hotel and dropped me off at my room. After Haruhi was satisfied that I was okay, she told Asahina-san that she would take my place in her group during the second half of today's search before the four of them finally left. I noticed Haruhi gave me one last look of concern before she closed the door.

The moment that they were finally gone, I felt an enormous wave of relief hit me. I did it! I avoided Haruhi's confession! I don't know how I managed to get so lucky, but now I had the piece of mind in knowing that it was unlikely that Haruhi was going to get another opportunity to confess to me. I felt so much better that I almost forgot about the crappy hangover.

The next couples of hours were spent doing exactly what I said I would: resting. Fortunately, the bed sheets had been changed, and the room was now clean. It didn't take long before I eventually passed out for a bit.

I was asleep for about two hours before I finally woke up. It helped a lot. My hangover was markedly better than it was before. The queasiness in my stomach and the throbbing in my head as all but gone. I almost felt normal.

I spent the next couple hours after that watching TV. Unfortunately, there wasn't much that was good on, so eventually, I put the TV on some random channel and laid back again to think. Truthfully, despite that fact that I narrowly avoided a disaster, there was one thing that I soon realized that bothered me greatly…

If Haruhi was so dead set on confessing to me today during the second part of our search for mysteries, why did she so easily give in and let me stay here and rest? If Haruhi really wanted to confess to me, and had been planning to do so for quite a while, then it probably would've been next to impossible to convince her not to be alone with me. She would've found any excuse she could come up with to be alone with me so she could finally admit the truth.

And then there was also the fact that there was no way for me to know whether I had actually avoided the so called terrible event that I was told about. If my understanding of time travel was correct, it's unlikely that I actually avoided it. That could only mean one of two things: Either this terrible event is unrelated to Haruhi trying to confess to me, or Haruhi found some other way to confess to me, and I managed to avoid nothing.

Upon this realization, the feeling of relief I felt earlier was now completely gone, replaced by the feeling of dread instead. I realized now that I was foolish to be so confident that things were now okay.

No, I couldn't give up just yet. There has to be a way. I had to find a solution to all my problems, and I had to do it soon. I just wished I knew what it was that I had to do now. Dammit, why isn't that water that I drank from that stream making me wiser already?

I turned the TV off and sat back in reflection, hoping that another bolt of inspiration would come and inform me what I needed to do. Unfortunately, I failed to come up with anything. I knew what the biggest problem I was facing was. It was the fact that there was a really good chance that I was going to hurt Haruhi. This fact would only be exacerbated if she actually confessed to me. What would I say to her if she did? "Hey Haruhi, thanks for telling me how you feel. By the way, I'm moving. Sorry about that." I can't do that! Even I know that would result in disaster. To make matter worse, I'm certain that she's going to want to know how I feel about her and… I don't have answer. I still don't even know how I feel about her. I could lie to her and say that I do have feelings for her… but would I be lying? Dammit, I hate thinking about this. Damn you, Oruki! Thanks to you kicking me out, I don't have the time to figure this out. If I end up accidentally destroying the universe, I'm putting the blame squarely on you!

It was then that the door opened, revealing Haruhi and the others. I figured that they all wanted to check on me to see if I was better.

"How are you feeling?" asked Haruhi.

"Better," I said, which was only the half-truth. Physically, I was fine. Not one-hundred percent, but closer to the upper eighties, and enough that I could manage. As for my mental and emotional state… well… I already said how I felt about that.

"Good," said Haruhi before issuing an order. "We're going to get ready for dinner. I want you and Koizumi to get your best clothes on. I made reservations to a really nice restaurant that I want all of us to go to."

I was caught off guard by this, as Haruhi made absolutely no mention of this at any point during the meetings we had both before and during the trip. I remembered her mentioning for me to bring the nicest thing I had to wear, but I had assumed that was for the convention tomorrow.

Haruhi and the girls left shortly after that, leaving Koizumi and I to get ready. As I was reaching for my suitcase, Koizumi began to speak to me.

"It good that you're feeling better. I got the feeling that you were trying to avoid being alone with Suzumiya-san. Was that the reason why you faked your illness?"

"I wasn't faking," I retorted, fibbing only a little. "Besides, is there anything wrong with wanting a little space away from Haruhi?"

"Not necessarily, although I get the feeling that you went out of your way to get away from her. Were you suspecting that she was planning something? Unfortunately, I believe your efforts were in vain. I don't suspect that Suzumiya-san was planning anything during our searches."

"Really," I said, hinting at my disappointment. This only makes me more worried that she had plans of a different sort in mind. Well, at least getting out of the search wasn't a complete waste, as it gave me a chance to rest and reflect. Still, I was in a bad position, and this

dinner we were getting ready for was starting to become increasingly suspicious.

The outfit I wore was the same one that I wore to the party that the Brigade had at Tsuruya's house the day before I was supposed to leave. It was definitely not formal wear, but since I didn't have anything even close to formal with me at Haruhi's house, I had to settle on wearing this.

Koizumi, on the other hand, had a perfectly tailored suit to wear. Seeing him put it on irked me quite a bit. No, it wasn't because I was jealous. It was because I knew he was doing it just to be a kiss-ass again.

It didn't take long for Koizumi and I to finish getting ready. The same could not be said for the girls. I kinda half-expected this, but it was still annoying. I figured that a lot of the time lost would be because Nagato probably needed the most help getting ready, as she's not really the type that dressed up much.

Ultimately, it took an hour and a half after we had gotten done before the girls finally exited their room. Nagato had been dolled up considerably, wearing a light blue gown and having a small flower clipped to her hair. Asahina-san was wearing a pink colored dress with her hair put together in one long braid in the back. Haruhi's dress was an elegant navy blue, with her hair done in a small bun in the back of her head. All three were wearing make-up, enhancing their beauty even further. To be honest, the sight of the three of them dressed like that was almost enough to make me wonder why I ever complain that I'm part of the Brigade. Almost…

"How do we look?" asked Haruhi as she twirled around quickly.

My answer was nothing more than a goofy grin and a thumbs up. I must've looked like an idiot doing that.

Haruhi soon noticed what I was wearing and gave me a look of annoyance. "Damn you, Kyon! Is that what you plan on wearing?"

"It all I have," I responded. "Sorry."

Haruhi sighed deeply, aiming her breath upward and causing a few strands of hair to fly up. "And you wonder why you're the lowest ranked member. Where's your commitment?"

Is it too late to use some of that money to buy my a suit before we go? Wait a minute! Now that I think about it, where did you get those dresses anyway?

Asahina-san giggled a bit, putting her fingers to her lips as she did so. "This was the surprise that Suzumiya-san want to show you. We thought it was best to buy them here."

So that's what the girls were doing yesterday. While Koizumi and I were going all over the city like morons, these three were picking out dresses for tonight. Wait a minute! That means that they knew about the dinner at least since yesterday. Why was I left out of the loop?

"This isn't time for silly questions, Kyon," interrupted Haruhi. "We'll just have to settle with what you're wearing tonight. We need to get going. It's already starting to get late."

And with that statement, the five of us made our way out of the hotel and into a large, dark colored limousine that apparently was waiting for us. Just how much money did Haruhi spend preparing for this evening? The dresses alone must've cost a large chunk of that money we earned last week, and between the limousine and the expensive dinner we're about to have, there was no doubt that if the rest of that money wasn't completely spent, it was close to it. Without a doubt, this was all extremely suspicious.

Upon inspection, I noticed that our limo driver was none other than Arakawa-san himself, making me all the more uncomfortable. Damn you, Koizumi! Can't we ever go on a trip without your Organization pals butting in? Haruhi didn't seem to notice that he was the one driving as we got inside and began to take off toward our destination.

I wondered how Koizumi would explain away his presence if she had noticed.

It didn't take long for us to reach our destination, and when we exited the limo, we quickly made our way towards the entrance. As expected, Haruhi had indeed booked the restaurant in advance, and we were soon seated at a table in the middle. The restaurant décor, despite being somewhat western, was relaxed and soothing. This was somewhat helpful in easing my nerves. Koizumi and Nagato took their seat next to me while Asahina-san and Haruhi took theirs across. I felt like we stuck out like a sore thumb, partly since we were considerably younger than most of the people also sitting within the restaurant. This place was definitely not for high school students. I was just glad that no one said anything about what I was wearing.

It wasn't long before we were asked what we wanted to eat. Not in the mood for anything out of the ordinary, I settled for a teriyaki streak. I didn't really pay attention to what everyone else ordered, as I was too lost in thought to care.

Our drinks were served quickly (Haruhi was adamant about making sure that none of us had alcohol), and shortly after they arrived, Haruhi raised her glass off the table, giving an indication that she wanted to give a toast.

"No matter what happens tomorrow, may the Brigade come back from this trip with awesome memories!"

It was then that I remembered that I never bothered to ask if the search was successful or not. Well, I already knew it wasn't, but wouldn't that mean that our mission here to Kyoto was a failure. What the hell do we plan to do tomorrow if we got nothing to show James Randi?

"Don't worry about that now, Kyon," answered Haruhi. "While our searches were not a success, we've undoubtedly gained valuable experience from this trip anyway!"

That wasn't the original goal of the trip, though. We were supposed to find something supernatural in nature so we could bring it in front of James Randi and embarrass him. If we confronted him without anything, the only people that are going to be embarrassed are us.

"You just let me deal with what happens when we meet him. I had a contingency plan just in case this happened."

That's what I'm afraid of…

This conversation drifted off onto different topics, such as what would our next destination would be. Tokyo, Osaka, and a few other places were debated upon, but when the topic went towards the idea of a camping trip, Haruhi became even more excited.

"Maybe we can go up into the mountains and find ourselves a yeti!"

Too bad that even if they existed, yetis aren't native to Japan. Although knowing you, it'd just be my luck that we'd find one anyway… Wait, why am I thinking that I'm going to be there?

It was so easy to get caught up in Haruhi's enthusiasm that I repeatedly forgot that this was going to be my last trip with the Brigade. Truth be told, this conversation we were having, with Asahina-san's shy responses, Koizumi's constant agreement, Nagato's serene silence, and Haruhi's boisterous announcements, were all quite enjoyable. Without a doubt I would miss all of it. Dammit, I wish it didn't have to be this way.

I could curse Oruki for kicking me out. I could curse my dad for getting that stupid job transfer. I could even curse myself for failing to find a place to live, but none of that mattered. Whether I liked it or not, tomorrow would be the last full day I would get with the Brigade. I figured I'd try my best to enjoy it.

I had been initially concerned about the nature of this night out, but it appeared that nothing unusual was going to happen. I was quite sure that Haruhi wouldn't go confessing to me in front of everyone. If

what Koizumi had told me about her is true, she'd probably be too embarrassed to. That meant that as long as the whole group was together, I could safely enjoy the dinner as much as possible.

The entrées arrived before long, and everyone could begin eating. I then finally discovered what everyone decided to order. Haruhi had ordered a smoked salmon dish with various vegetables, Asahina-san ordered a Japanese-style spinach salad (also known as gomae), Koizumi ordered beef sukiyaki, and Nagato ordered stuffed cabbage. I didn't waste too much time eating my meal, as I was starving since I didn't eat lunch. It was quite delicious, by the way, but at a place like this, that's to be expected.

The conversation died down a bit as everyone went and enjoyed their meal. I noticed that Nagato was once again eating at her usual break-neck pace, and it wasn't long before her plate was clean. I noticed that Asahina-san and Koizumi were also eating somewhat more quickly than normal, as if they might be in some kind of rush. For two people who were usually so well mannered, it seemed quite unusual. What surprised me the most was the unusually slow pace Haruhi was taking. Normally, this girl would be second only to Nagato when it came to speed eating, but tonight she appeared almost methodical in how she ate her dish, as if she was savoring it too much.

It was then that Nagato stood up, catching me a bit off guard. "I have finished my meal. May I be excused?"

Haruhi merely nodded and waved her off, which I thought was a bit odd. "Sure, Yuki-chan. You maybe excused."

Wait, why is Nagato planning on leaving so early? That's certainly not like her. And how does she plan on getting back? There's only one limo after all.

Nagato ignored my questions and politely bowed before she silently made her way out of the restaurant. Was she planning on walking back? There was no way for me to be certain, although I knew that

walking back would be a problem since the place wasn't that far from the hotel. Also, if there was anyone who would be perfectly safe walking the streets alone in a dress, it was Nagato. I'd almost feel sorry for the poor fool that decided to target her for a mugging or possible rape victim. It would almost certainly end very badly for them.

Just as I was getting used to the idea of Nagato leaving, Asahina-san then also stood up. "I have to go wash up."

Leaving her meal only half finished, Asahina-san made her way towards the restroom in the back of the restaurant. Normally, the idea of someone going to the bathroom after eating wouldn't be anything to be alarmed about, but there was something in the way she said it that made it suspicious. That, and the fact that she was taking a very long time to "wash up" was enough of a reason for me to suddenly become very nervous. Something was definitely wrong.

It was only when Koizumi himself stood up when I realized what was happening.

"That was a wonderful meal. Now if you excuse me, I'd like to go outside and get a breath of fresh air."

It was all a set up…

The moment I made this realization, my heart began to race again. I knew immediate what was happening now. The moment Koizumi walked out of the restaurant, Haruhi and I would be alone. Alone in a restaurant with a rather romantic setting, with Haruhi herself wearing a rather stunning and elegant dress. Exactly the situation I absolutely **didn't** want to have happen during this trip.

"You're coming back, right?" I asked Koizumi in a voice that only barely contained my growing sense of panic. Koizumi only responded with his annoying smile as he made his way out the door to the restaurant. Koizumi you bastard! Come back! I won't forgive you for this!

It was then that I began to wonder just how long this whole thing had been planned… and whether all three of them had been in on it the whole time. Thinking back to it, there were multiple times when Haruhi could have easily had the opportunity to plan this with them, like that time period when she was out of the house while I sneaking a peek at her electronic diary. Damn you, Haruhi! How could I not see this coming? I didn't think you'd be so sneaky as to get the others on your side!

Things at the table became very quiet once it was down to just the two of us. I noticed that the look on Haruhi's face had the slightest hint of nervousness in it, which did little the ease my own nerves. Quite the contrary, I was a complete wreck on the inside, so much so, that I accidentally dropped my knife onto the floor when I tried to cut my next bite.

Before I could reach down to grab it, Haruhi went and handed me her knife. "You can use mine. I don't need it for my dish."

I reluctantly took her knife. "Thanks. I guess your fish looks easy enough to cut with a fork. How is it?"

"Want to try?" asked Haruhi as she cut a bite sized piece with her fork and held it out to me to eat. It should be noted that the way she was doing this would totally give an outsider the wrong impression about us, but then again, I was starting to think that it was intentional.

I tried not to think too much into it when I took the bite of fish into my mouth. I had to admit that the smoky flavor was tasty. "It's good."

"How's yours?" she asked.

I'm not an idiot. I knew immediately what she wanted me to do. It was as if she wanted to have this scene play out like some really bad western romance movie, where the couples share each others food over a romantic dinner, and I really, really didn't want to play along.

I decided to do the not so romantic thing and slide my dish towards her. "Here."

Haruhi's immediate response to this was annoyance. She crossed her arms and stared me down, as if trying to signal to me that I was screwing up. It was a really uncomfortable stare, and it felt like she could burn a hole right through my head. Thanks goodness there's no such thing as a Haruhi Beam. I'd be screwed for sure if there was one.

"Idiot!" yelled Haruhi as she went a grabbed her knife back and cut a piece of the steak before shoving it in her mouth and looking away, her arms immediately crossing again. "It's okay." I couldn't help but spot the fact that her expression of annoyance had a slight twinge of disappointment in it.

Seeing that look on her face must've made me feel a little bad, as I began to reconsider my decision. It's not like I want to ruin the dinner or anything. I just didn't want her to get the wrong idea. Eventually, though, I gave in and cut another piece from my streak and held it towards her. "Why don't you try this piece?"

Haruhi's expression softened as her eyes darted between the piece of meat and my face. She then slowly bent forward and took the steak that I offered into her mouth. She chewed it slowly, as if actually trying to take in its flavors this time. "Better…"

It was at this point that I decided to try and make some small talk in a desperate attempt to avoid any chance for her to say anything I didn't want to hear. "So… uh… are we really just going to show up at the convention tomorrow without anything to show for our efforts?"

"I told you not to worry about it," answered Haruhi nonchalantly. "It's okay that we didn't find anything mysterious or strange. I've been wanting to say a thing or two to that old geezer for a while, anyway. I'll win this battle by any means necessary! Remember that this is war! In war, if you run out of guns, you use knives! If you run out of

knives, you use rocks! The important thing is to use whatever you have available to win the day!"

Instead of doing the logical thing and, I don't know, surrender? I've never been much of the Kamikaze type.

Haruhi continued her speech. "We're all going to wear our arm bands when we confront him tomorrow, so that everyone will know who we are. No matter what happens, it's a victory for us, because we're bound to get ourselves a ton of publicity! I might even plug in the web address for our website! Imagine how many hits we'll get when I do that!"

My guess? Zero…

To be fair, I was actually enjoying Haruhi go off on her tangent about what her plans were for tomorrow. My mild grin contrasted with Haruhi million-watt smile as the two of us continued our conversation. I didn't realize it right away, but while we were doing this, I had been subconsciously shifting my positions to emulate Haruhi's while she was doing the same towards me. When she leaned forward, so did I. When I took a drink, so did she. It happened so naturally that I'd completely failed to notice it until the both of us were leaning close to each other, and I realized that Haruhi was staring rather deeply into my eyes. Her expression softened further to the point where she was no longer smiling. She had a look of seriousness in her face, but it was mixed with the slightest hint of doubt, I think. To be honest, it was an expression that was both adorable and beautiful.

And then she said this. "I think the most important thing about this trip for me was that I didn't want to leave empty-handed."

My heart jumped a little when she said that, mostly because I knew she wasn't talking about our inevitable confrontation with James Randi. I then notice how close our faces had become, and I immediately pulled back before swallowing hard.

It was then that the two of us got the feeling that we'd stayed at the restaurant long enough, and it was time to go. We gathered our things and made our way outside, towards the limo. Arakawa-san was careful to hide his face as he opened the door to the limo. I was curious as to how Asahina-san and Koizumi had left, but I merely assumed that they both had their means of getting back easily enough.

I was feeling very relieved at this point, because despite what had been said, there wasn't a confession made by Haruhi. If she was planning to tell me how she felt in the restaurant, she failed to do so. Pretty soon, the two of us would be back at the hotel, and I'd be back in my room getting some much needed shut-eye. Haruhi said nothing on the ride back to the hotel. She merely continued to stare out the window, appearing to be lost in thought. I'd wondered if she was feeling regret for not saying more, or if there was something else on her mind.

I didn't get the chance to figure it out, as we were soon back at that hotel. The two of us walked inside and took the elevator up to the floor that our rooms were at. The dead silence between seemed to only deepened the tension as the elevator doors opened. We both walked out, but just as I was about to turn towards the direction of our rooms, I felt a hand grip my arm tightly. I turned towards Haruhi, confused as to what she was doing.

Her eyes darted away from my face as she spoke. "Kyon… there's somewhere I wanted to take you…"

My confusion only worsened as she suddenly took off in the opposite direction of where our rooms were located, dragging along by my arm. Her incredible strength was not lost on me when she kicked open a door and proceeded to pull me up several flights of stairs. It was all I could do just to keep up. I wanted to ask her what she was doing, but the words just wouldn't come out. It was as if my mind had gone completely blank.

Eventually, we reached the top flight of stairs and came across another door, which Haruhi quickly opened. It was the door to the roof of the hotel. The fact that the door was somehow unlocked never occurred to me at the time as she pulled me outside and towards the edge. She then let go of me, and slowly walked a bit closer to the edge.

I looked up at the sky, and soon realized that it dazzled marvelously in a display of countless tiny, shimmering lights, much like the night on the rooftop of Haruhi's house but even more so. The wind had picked up ever so slightly, giving a noticeable breeze. The lights of the streets below sparkled like a thousand candles, seemingly moving about in rhythm. It was a glorious sight, the kind that few people in their lifetime would get the honor in seeing. A setting like this would be impossible to have in a city like this. No, only someone like Haruhi could allow all this to be possible.

But I couldn't enjoy the scene. Why? Because I knew what was about to happen. There was no doubt in it anymore. Everything that Haruhi had done for this trip had led to this moment.

I nervously began to try to find an excuse to get away. "Uh… Haruhi… I… it's getting late, and I'm feeling really tired and…"

"Kyon," interrupted Haruhi. "There's something I want to say to you…" She then removed the hair band holding the bun together, causing her hair to fall to her shoulders. The wind began to caress her hair, causing it to dance. Her dress also began to sway in much the same way as her hair, as if they were partners that were sharing the same dance with each other.

Again, I could not bring myself to enjoy the sight, because at that very moment, I was frightened. I was experiencing a fear greater than any I could ever think of at that moment. Koizumi had warned me that this moment was inevitable. Why couldn't he be wrong? Why?

"Do you remember that question I asked you?" she asked. "About whom you would bring with you if you had to bring someone with you to a deserted island."

"What about it?"

"When… I answered that question… I wasn't being honest. There's someone else that I would rather bring with me other than Yuki."

I felt my heart pounding harder and harder with every word she spoke. My legs and hands began to tremble ever so slightly. My stomach began to churn violently.

Haruhi continued to speak. "It's funny… how much things have changed since I started high school. I never would've guessed that I'd end up with such amazing friends… even if they are only human."

I failed to reflect on the irony of her statement. I was too lost within myself to notice it.

"I'll never forget the day you asked me about my hair. I don't know what it was, but something about it made me realize that… you… thought a lot like I did. In just one question, you said so much more yourself than most biographers could say in a whole book. I wasn't sure at first, but something told me that you were going to become a very important person in my life."

My eyes continued to widen further as I began to sweat profusely. I could feel my mouth becoming ever dryer, to the point where I knew I couldn't speak.

"And of course, I have you to thank for giving me the inspiration for the SOS Brigade. I can't imagine what my life would've been like if I hadn't thought of it, and I'm not really sure if I would have thought of it if it hadn't been for that silly speech you gave."

Haruhi… please stop….

"The year that followed was easily the best year of my whole life. I got to meet some great people, and do some really great things. No matter what happened, I always had a blast with you guys. But…"

Her head lowered a bit as if her thoughts were starting to begin to fill with regret. "I… I know that it wasn't always great. I'll never forget the fight we had at Tsuruya's house when we making the movie. And then you got hurt falling down the stairs at school a few days before our Christmas party. I was really scared that you weren't going to make it. It was really bad."

Haruhi… please… stop talking… I can't take this…

"But, you were okay after all, and I started to think that nothing could come between us. I started to take the fact that you were still here for granted. I thought you'd always be there, no matter what. But then… I found out that you were moving, and it happened all over again. I had to face the reality that you being here wasn't a given. That you could be gone from my life so easily, and that there wasn't a whole lot I could do to stop it. I was lucky again that you didn't leave, and I've been happy that you've been living with me and getting along with my parents, more or less, but I knew now that I couldn't become complacent anymore. I know now that if I waited any longer, I'd never get the chance to tell you the truth."

My breathing was now so fast that I was starting to wonder if I was hyperventilating. The trembling in my limbs was stronger than ever, and I was becoming light-headed.

"I had a strange dream a year ago. We were stuck on the school grounds together, unable to escape. And there were these weird, blue giants that appeared out of nowhere. I remember that we were running from them when we suddenly stopped. It was then that you walked up to me and put your hands on my shoulders and… you told me something really stupid before you went and… kissed me… It was so real that I was thrown out of my bed when I woke up from it. I didn't want to believe it then, but I knew it for sure, deep inside me, the truth."

Please don't say it, Haruhi… I'm begging you not to… Please…

She turned towards me, strands of hair gently caressing her face. Her smile was gentle and sincere. Her eyes glimmered with a serene glow. It was the look of someone who about ready to release a great burden from off their chest.

"… I love you, Kyon… and I have for a very long time…"

The moment those words reached my ears, I felt myself floating away from my body. Every sensation I had felt beforehand was a distant memory. The moment felt completely surreal, as if it must have been a dream. It was as if my mind was trying to convince me that none of this had actually happened and that everything was okay. But I knew for sure that it did, and that was the worst part. Try as I might, I had nothing to say. There was nothing I could say. I was as if every word of Japanese I'd ever learned had been sucked from my brain, leaving me an empty husk of swirling, chaotic emotions. I felt wretched inside, and I was starting to realize why. I knew now exactly why I didn't want Haruhi to confess to me.

Before I could settle my thoughts, I felt a finger touch my lips. Snapping back into reality, I looked down to see Haruhi looking away from me as her finger continued to be pressed against my lips.

"I know what I said was a lot to take in, so I'm going to give you a chance to think about what I said. Tomorrow, after we get back from our trip, I want to hear your response. I… want you to tell me how you feel about me…"

After that, she removed her finger and went up and gave me a light peck on my cheek before she bolted away, perhaps too afraid that I would say something before she was ready to hear it.

The moment she was gone, I collapsed onto the ground. The weight of everything that had happened to me this night was too much for me to bear. Why was it that a confession could be so painful? It was because at that very moment, I knew exactly what the older Asahina-

san was talking about when she said there would be a disaster that was about to happen.

I knew that no matter how I felt about Haruhi, I was ultimately going to break her heart. And the whole universe was going to feel the effects of that very heartbreak.

She didn't know that I was moving, and the moment she finds out, everything will be undone. Oruki had decided to kick me out of the house to prevent this very thing from happening, but he was too late. He failed to prevent this from happening, and so did I.

One day from now, I will have to face up to Haruhi and tell her the truth. There's nothing else I could do. I still had one more day to figure something out, but I already knew it was hopeless. The only thing I could hope for was that the damage in the end would not be too bad…

Damn you, Haruhi…

…

…

…

Damn you…

And so with the publishing of this chapter, this fic now officially becomes the longest TMoHS fanfic ever written, surpassing "Unmasked" in terms of total words. I sincerely hope that this chapter was worth the wait.

I won't lie. The next chapter may take a while, for one main reason. I'm going to try and contact James Randi himself to see

if I can get any advice about writing his character. I doubt I'll succeed, but I'm certain that the scene at the convention center will be very difficult to write. I'm hoping my writer's block isn't too bad during it.

Once I get past that scene, it's all smooth sailing from there. I'm certain I'll get through the rest of the story rather quickly, as the chapters from that point onward will be short, intense, and sweet. I hope you guys are looking forward to it.

Until next update…

Chapter 26

Here is the latest chapter, completed as a nice little Thanksgiving's Day present to all of my American friends (and to my non-American friends, too, even if you don't celebrate the holiday).

I decided to go ahead with this chapter anyway, even though I was unable to get into contact with James Randi. I was very disappointed that I failed, but I guess it's not the end of the world.

I was very surprised by the number of people who said that they thought James Randi was a fictional character. Well, he's very real, and I encourage all of you to check out his YouTube channel, called JamesRandiFoundation. It would make me happy to know that I've helped the man increase his fanbase.

Anyway, the story must go on, and I'm both extremely happy and very relieved that everyone loved the latest chapter. I hope that you guys enjoy the upcoming chapter just as much. The climax of the story is quickly approaching, and I know all of you are eager to read it.

And before I forget, I made a poll on my profile page. I'm hoping that some of you will take the time to answer it. I would appreciate it if you did.

Well, here you go…

Chapter 26

"… I love you, Kyon… and I have for a very long time…"

Why did she have to say that? Why couldn't she have chickened out on confessing her feelings like she had several times before? What

did she hope to gain from it? I… I just didn't know.

I was now resting inside a local bath house, hoping the warm water would calm me down. It was about an hour after the confession now, and I was still an emotional mess. I breathed deeply as I watched the steam slowly rise from the warm water. I still had no idea as to what I was going to do. I still had some time to find some kind of solution, but I was pretty sure now that things were going to get a lot worse before they got better.

It was then that I noticed that someone else was approaching me and soon took a seat next to me. Seeing as this room was reserved only for men, by process of elimination, I knew exactly who it was before the person even spoke.

"So how did dinner turn out?" asked Koizumi.

I didn't bother to respond, mostly because I was still a little peeved about how he and the others left me behind. I knew by now that the three of them were in on the whole thing, and I felt a little betrayed.

"I take it that she went through with it," said Koizumi, looking almost amused. "I'll admit that we all knew what was going to happen before the trip. Suzumiya-san went and got together with the three of us about a week before the trip and told us her idea. We were all given instructions as to what we were expected to do over the last week. I was instructed by Suzumiya-san not the say anything, but I felt obligated to drop some hints about it. I probably would've done the same even if she never told us ahead of time."

I didn't have the will to respond. I lowered my head a bit more, letting the warmth of the water vapor hit my face.

For about a minute, the two of us were silent, perhaps because Koizumi noticed my anxiety and was unsure of what to say about it. He continued with his annoying smile, but he seemed to be rather reflective as well. "Remember that talk we had yesterday, before we returned to the hotel?"

It took me a second to remember what he meant. "What? You that parallel universe stuff you were prattling on about?"

"Yes, indeed," answered Koizumi. "As I had explained before, 'M' Theory is an explanation that gives the possibility that an infinite number of parallel universes exist. However, I had my own theory that I developed based upon what I learned about 'M' Theory. Care to listen?"

If you're doing this to try and get me to forget about the whole confession thing, thanks, but you're failing miserably. If you're doing it because you just like to hear yourself talk… never mind. Just go on.

"In any case, if there are in fact an infinite number of universes, and thus an infinite number of possibilities, then it follows that it's likely that any scenario that you could imagine in your mind has actually happened in at least one alternate universe. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

I didn't respond with words. Instead, I gave him a quick look with my eyes just to humor him.

Koizumi must've gotten the message that I heard him since he continued. "Now imagine that it's not a coincidence that our imaginative thoughts just happen to coincide with what has happened in another universe. What if instead that our imagination is in fact a kind of psychic link to parallel universes. What if the only reason we even have an imagination is because our brains are able to see into other worlds. If that's the case, then nothing we imagine is made up. Everything ever invented inside the human mind has actually happened in a parallel universe."

"I see," I responded, giving the idea some thought. "So are you saying there's really no such thing as imagination?"

"Well, I would put it that the word 'imagination' would simply need to be redefined. In any case, if this theory were true, it would mean that

every story, every book, movie, television show, anime, manga and anything else involving story telling are actually just a retelling of events that actually occurred. They just didn't occur in our universe."

He then hit me with a bombshell. "It's even possible that someone is peering a look at us at this very moment, using what he believes to be fictional events for story telling purposes."

Who in there right mind would want to imagine the two of us, sitting in a bathhouse, talking about such nonsense. And if he's actually taking the time to write any of this down, he needs to go outside more. And what if he can see into my thoughts? Get out of my head, dammit!

"Unfortunately," said Koizumi. "The truth is that I can't actually prove this theory. In fact, since it can't be proven or disproven, it's not really a theory at all, at least not a scientific one. Nevertheless, it's fun to think about, is it not?"

I didn't answer him. If I had been in a better mood, I might have enjoyed hearing this theory of his a bit more. Unfortunately, my depression was far too deep for me to be able to. Now that I thought about it, I realized that Koizumi still didn't know as to what was happening. In all the time during the week, I decided against telling him what was happening, mostly because I feared that he and his Organization would interfere in some way. Thinking about it now, I realized that he needed to know, especially since things were starting to look really bleak.

"Koizumi, there's something I need to tell you."

Koizumi turned to me, his expression giving off a slight twinge of surprise. "What's that?"

I took a minute to think about how I would tell him the truth. Without looking him in the face, I began to speak. "I have some really bad news. It's… well… the truth is that I can't really return Haruhi's feelings. The reason is… Haruhi's father is kicking me out of the

house when we return from this trip, and I'm being forced to have to move back with my parents up north. I've already bought the train ticket, and I'm leaving this Monday."

When my eyes moved up towards Koizumi's face, I noticed that his smile was now gone, and his eyes stared sharply at me for a moment. A second later, he turned away, trying his hardest to regain his composure. "I see…" He flicked a little bit of hair in front of his face before resting his chin on his hand. He was trying hard to hide it, but it was obvious that he was deeply disturbed by the news. "I… suppose you realize that Suzumiya-san will not take this news well."

"It's doubtful," I responded. "I had really hoped that Haruhi wouldn't confess to me. Now I feel even worse about it."

"This is much more serious than whether or not you feel bad about the situation. The moment Suzumiya-san finds out about this, it's almost certain that she will respond to the situation in a manner that will put this entire universe into great risk. You are aware of that, right?"

"The last time this happened, she didn't destroy the world over it. She did create some of those closed spaces, but those were manageable, weren't they?"

"In the month that has past since then, a lot has changed. It's almost certain that her feelings for you have grown stronger since then. The fact that she's finally revealed them to you is proof of that fact. We were fortunate that the last time that her reaction was relatively mild, but I guarantee you that things will be different this time around. There will much more than mere closed spaces to worry about when she finally finds out."

"What am I supposed to do then?" I asked a little harshly. I was upset partly because I knew he was right. The premonition that Asahina-san (Big) gave me was proof of that.

"The Organization can help you. If it's a place to stay, I'm certain I can arrange something."

"No!" I said in response. "I can't do that!"

"Why not?" asked Koizumi, doing all he could to hide his frustration. "Keeping Suzumiya-san happy is of the utmost priority. If that means keeping you around and giving her what she wants, then it must be so."

"Are you saying that I'm supposed to pretend to love her, even if I don't?"

The last words of my question hit him with a tremendous weight. It was all he could to retain the last remnants of his composure. "Are you saying that you don't love her?"

"I… don't know…" I responded as I put my hand on my face. "All I know is that if I don't love her, then all I'm doing by staying is delaying the inevitable. I'm going to hurt her eventually. What's the sense of trying to put off what we know will happen?"

Koizumi stared at me intensely for a good minute, as if he was studying me. "Why are you running?"

I looked at him in confusion. "What are you talking about?"

"The way you're acting… you're not doing it for Suzumiya-san's sake, or the world's. You're acting this way because you're afraid of something."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said in complete denial.

"I don't believe you," said Koizumi as he continued to stare me down. "What are you afraid of? Are you afraid of the truth about how you really feel about her?"

Annoyed and frustrated with his question, I stood up and began to make my way out of the room. "I'm done. See you tomorrow…"

I didn't look back to see what his reaction was. It wasn't long before I had returned to my room to lie down. I had forgotten when I left the bath house that Koizumi and I were sharing the room, so when he returned an hour after I returned, there was an awkward silence between us. He didn't say anything to me. Instead, he simply got ready for bed and lied down for the night.

Although I didn't check, I got the feeling neither of us got much sleep that night…

The next sound I heard was that of loud knocking on my door, followed by the rattling of our door knob.

"Dammit you two!" came a voice obviously belonging to Haruhi from behind the door. "Get up now or we're going to be late!"

I stirred from my sleep a bit before I gave a large yawn and stretch. Koizumi had gotten up and answered the door before I did.

"My apologies, Suzumiya-san. The two of us had difficulty sleeping last night, and thus we had greater difficulty rousing ourselves from bed on time."

Haruhi's tone calmed slightly when she noticed it was Koizumi addressing her. "It's fine. Just hurry up and get dressed. We have a lot to do today!" She then eyed me as well before pointing a finger at me. "That includes you too, Kyon! Hurry up already! This day is way too important for you to screw up!" After that, she walked off back to her room.

"Jeez," I said in annoyance. "What's with her?" I looked at the clock and noticed it was only a quarter after nine. "The convention doesn't even start until twelve. Why is she in such a rush?"

"Well, I'm certain Suzumiya-san doesn't want to take any chances. The earlier the better, I suppose."

I couldn't help but notice that Koizumi's voice still had some very small traces of some of the negative feelings that he must've felt last night. No doubt that he must be expecting the worst to happen soon.

It was then that our door was rudely swung open again. "And don't you dare forget your armbands. It's super important that you bring them!"

Yes, Haruhi. We know…

A half hour later, we were all seated in the restaurant, preparing to eat breakfast. While we waited for our food, Haruhi decided now was a good time to go over our plan for today.

"As you know, we were unsuccessful in our search for the mysterious. Unfortunately, this means that we will not be able to collect our million dollar prize."

Was there ever any doubt that we'd fail? It's really too bad that you're not allowed to know the truth about your Brigade members. I'm sure five minutes with Nagato displaying her awesome reality bending powers would be more than enough to net us the cash.

"However, I had planned ahead for this, and I have developed a contingency plan. Granted, we won't be able to prove the old fart wrong, but instead we're going to confront him head on!"

She then went about and explained what we were going to do. After about five minutes, I was left with only one impression. This had to be one of the most asininely stupid and insane ideas I have ever heard.

"You… you're kidding me, right?"

Haruhi scowled at me in annoyance. "What are you talking about? I'm being completely serious! You better have been listening, Kyon! If you screw up your part of the plan, all our efforts will have been in vain!"

Wasn't the real reason that you even came out here was so you could confess to me? What difference does it make if this stupid plan succeeds? What the heck do we plan to get out of it?"

"Notoriety!" answered Haruhi cheerfully. "Our goal should be to make a name for ourselves and let the entire would know about the SOS Brigade! We maybe well known where we live, but that's not nearly enough. I won't be satisfied until every person on the planet has heard the name of our club!"

And then you'll hope you'll get elected as Grand Empress of the world, right? I don't even want to think about what you'd do if you ever had that kind of power.

Despite my complaints, I was somewhat relieved about one thing. I had worried that after Haruhi confessed to me that she would start acting weird around me. Instead, she acted like it never happened. It was almost enough to make me wonder if it had or not. Almost…

After we had finished our breakfast, we immediately left for the convention center. As you might have guessed, we were early. An hour and a half early! The doors were still closed, and there wasn't a soul besides us who were waiting for the doors to open. Despite this, Haruhi refused to allow us to go somewhere else while we waited. The wait was excruciating…

By the time we were finally allowed inside, Haruhi wasted no time in showing security our passes as we made our way into the convention hall where we would be seated. I had no idea where the hell she got the passes we needed, and I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

Our seats were right up in the front row, another miracle if you had asked me. I couldn't help but feel like that there were outside forces conspiring to ensure everything happened the way Haruhi would want to. Either that, or Haruhi herself was indirectly responsible. In

either case, it made me feel like the whole moment was way too surreal.

Our seating arrangements were deliberate. Haruhi, of course, was in the middle. Sitting next to her was Asahina-san and Nagato. Koizumi and I were sitting on the opposite sides of the group, with me seated next to Nagato and Koizumi next to Asahina-san. Although I was certain that Haruhi would've preferred to sit next to me during the convention, for the sake of the plan, I was required to sit away from her. The reason for this would be made obvious soon enough.

It wasn't long before the other members of the audience began to arrive, and soon every seat was filled. I looked around us and noticed that most of the crowd consisted of people around our age, maybe a bit older. I soon realized that these people must be university students who came here specifically to see Randi. Our group was probably to only one who didn't consist of people going to college. I felt so out of place.

I watched as a young man walked up to the podium to give the introduction. "We have a very special guest here today. He resides in America, where he was formerly a famous magician. Since then, he became a world famous skeptic, using his time to debunk fraudsters and disprove many super-natural claims. He is the author of several books and is currently the head of an organization which is set out to give one million dollars to anyone who can prove any kind of paranormal phenomenon under a strict laboratory setting. To this day, no one has won the money yet. Of course, everyone here is welcome to try."

There was mild bit of laughter coming from the audience after that joke was made. He waited until it quiet before he continued.

"Everyone, please welcome 'The Amazing James Randi!'"

And there he was. The man that Haruhi had wanted to see for more than a month now. The very man that was now the SOS Brigade's

"Public Enemy #1." The man who was the "official" reason as to why we came all the way out here. There… was James Randi…

As expected, he was a very old man, whose back was hunched slightly. He was bald, and he had a large, white beard on his face. His face also carried a rather large pair of glasses as well. He could pass for Santa Claus if only his gut were a bit larger. He made his way to the podium while the speaker who introduced him step back a bit, indicating to the audience that the man was going to act as our interpreter while Randi spoke.

I turned to Haruhi as he reached the podium. Her eyes burned with a fire brighter than any I had seen in a long time. I was half-worried that she would jump onto the stage and beat the crap of him. Fortunately, it seemed that Haruhi was going to be able to hold her composure, for now.

The old man cleared his throat as he began to speak. "I would like to apologize ahead of time before I begin. The truth is that I'm a long way from home, and I'm experiencing a great deal of jet lag. I've been having trouble getting a decent night's sleep since I got here. I've been thinking about taking something to help me sleep."

He then pulls out a box from under his coat. "What I have here is a box containing a homeopathic sleep aid." He then looks closely at the box. "According to the directions, I'm to take one pill of this right before I go to bed. Well, to be honest, I'm thinking that I could really, really use the sleep, so I'm going to take more than just one."

He then went and opened the box and proceeded to consume not one, or two, or even three of the pills inside, but all of them. As he struggled to eat them, he went and took a swig from his water bottle in order to help the pills down.

"Tastes like chalk," he said as he put the water away. "Of course, if any of you are familiar with homeopathy, and are as skeptical of it as I am, then you'll know that I'm not really in any real danger. This is not the first time I have attempted such a stunt before. However, if I

am to suddenly become ill, I assure you that all of you will indeed be the first to know."

After a moment of him looking around at all the faces in the room, he went and continued his speech. "I would like to thank all of you for inviting me here to speak. It's not often that I am given the opportunity to speak outside of the U.S. Japan is an amazing nation. Despite its lack of natural resources, it's managed to build the second wealthiest nation on the planet. Fueling this drive and success is the same ingenuity and belief in scientific progress that helped many other nations create the great nations we have today. Many of you in this room will someday become the next great scientific minds that will help build upon the knowledge that your predecessors helped give you. That being said, the people of Japan are not immune to the foibles of their own superstitions as well…"

The lecture went on about how people all around the world go about their daily lives performing rituals in the hope that doing so would provide some kind benefit and fortune to their lives. I turned to Haruhi, noticing the intensity on her face. As someone who enjoys many of the traditional practices and rituals of our cultural, she certainly didn't appreciate any of the things the old man was saying.

Mr. Randi continued along with his speech. "I suppose if it gives you comfort to enjoy doing such things then feel free to do them. But if you truly believe doing such things actually affects the outcome of your life, then I have a million dollars for you if you can prove it."

What I would give for that kind of money. To think that if only Nagato or Koizumi would cooperate, I could be wealthy in no time. Sometimes it sucks to have to shoulder such responsibility.

"Unfortunately, I'm not an expert on the subject matter of Japanese culture, nor am I a scientist of any sort. I do, however, know a thing or two about some nonsense that people tend to believe in America. I'm hoping perhaps in talking about them that you will be able to draw your own conclusions about how you feel about some of the

things people do everyday without thinking about it. First, I'd like to talk about homeopathy…"

He then went on to talk about all the principles of homeopathy, including the ideas of "like cures like," "water memory," and all the other crap that comes with it. I was rather amused when he told us that a solution of homeopathic medicine of "1500X" was like taking a drop of the active ingredient, mixing it evenly into a mass of water the size of our solar system, then taking a drop from that mass of water and repeating the process two billion times. As James Randi would put it, "Now that's dilute!"

Upon finishing his talk about homeopathy, James moved the subject matter to the fact that even scientists can be fooled be tricksters. "A lot of people within the scientific community tend to believe that just because they happen to have an advanced degree that they are immune to being fooled. This is of course not true, and I'm going to demonstrate why."

The old man then pulled out what appeared to be a deck of five large cards. On each of the cards were the following shapes: a plus sign, a circle, a star, three squiggly lines, and a square. He also pulled out a manila envelope. "I would appreciate it if I could get a volunteer from the audience. Anyone?"

Almost immediately, Haruhi's hand shot up obviously desperate to participate. Perhaps she suspected that this was some kind of trick and had hoped she might be able to ruin the trick if she was careful enough to watch what he was doing. Whatever her reasons were, she appeared to be successful in gaining the old man's attention. Since we were in the front row, it was much easier for any of us to be picked.

Mr. Randi pointed to Haruhi, indicating that she would be his volunteer. "Okay young lady. Go ahead and carefully follow my instructions. I want you to take these card and hold them face down. While holding them face down, try to mix them up as best you can."

It should be noted that while Haruhi was doing this, Mr. Randi was looking away from her, as if trying not to see how she was mixing up the cards. After a minute, he then hands Haruhi the manila envelope. "Now if you would just be so kind as to place three cards under your chair while taking the other two and putting them together so that the faces face inward. Then take those two cards and place them in the envelope. Let me know when you're done."

Haruhi complied with the instructions while giving the old man a look of suspicion. Since James was still looking away, he failed to notice her look. Once she had placed the cards in the envelope, she called out that she was done, giving the gentleman the chance to take the envelope.

As the man walked back towards the podium, he held up the envelope in the air. "So tell me, what are the odds that I could correctly guess what the first card is?"

Someone behind us responded with the answer "One in five."

"Okay. That sounds about right," said James Randi. "It's good to know that my audience knows basic math. You'd be surprised how much of my American audience would struggle with that question." The way he worded the statement made so that those who understood him gave off a mild chuckle. "Now who can tell me what the chances are that I'd get the second card correct as well?"

It was Koizumi who fielded the answer to this question, being sure to speak it in English. Damn show off. "I believe the answer would be one in twenty."

Mr. Randi appeared impressed that the question was answered in his native language. "Correct as well. I will go on to state, however, that for the purposes of this exercise, the order in which the cards are placed doesn't matter, so the real probability is one in ten. Now I will reveal my answer." He then took a marker from inside his jacket and marks one side of the envelope with a plus and the other with a circle. He then proceeded to open the envelope and pull out the

cards. He then revealed to the audience that his guess was absolutely on the mark. Most of the audience clapped politely, impressed with the outcome.

James then went and put the envelope and cards down on the podium. "Unfortunately, the real odds that I would guess the cards correctly are not one in five or one in ten or even one in a million. The real odds are one in one. Why? Because it's a trick. I already knew the outcome of the trick before it even happened."

I began to desperately try in vain to figure out how he managed to pull off the trick. At no point did I see him take his hands off the envelope. It was almost a bit maddening. I turned to look at the others for their reactions. Asahina-san was easily the most amazed, obviously complete taken in by the trick. I wondered if magicians still exist in her time. I'm willing to bet they still do. Koizumi smiled politely, appearing a bit impressed by the trick. Haruhi appeared rather displeased, obviously upset that she failed to ruin his trick. The only one who didn't really react was, predictably, Nagato. If there was anyone that saw through the trick, it was her. I'll have to try and ask her later how his did that.

Mr. Randi returned to his spot behind the podium. "When dealing of those who are trying to trick you, it is foolish to think about the probability. No matter what you think the odds are in properly guessing these so-called phenomenon, when you're dealing with someone who is out to trick you, the odds are always going to be one in one. When I see these scientists and mathematicians trying to calculate the probability of a supposed psychic guessing someone's name correctly, it's ridiculous that the fact that they never suspect trickery in any of it. In fact, I actually have a theory about people who receive Ph.D.'s…"

Before Mr. Randi could continue with his lecture, Haruhi had stood up and stomped her foot loudly. That was signal that the four of us were told we'd be given earlier today. We all began to rise from our seats, prepared for the beginning of our operation. I placed a hand

on my face while the five of us stood there, interrupting the lecture. It was all I could do to hide my humiliation.

Haruhi wasted no time in announcing her intentions. "We've had enough of your lies James Randi! I am Haruhi Suzumiya, and we members of the SOS Brigade hereby officially declare war on you and your foundation!"

The old man appeared confused by the young girl's sudden outburst and, seeing as he didn't actually understand what she said, was unable to respond. The interpreter on stage appeared reluctant to translate what Haruhi had just said. Fortunately (or unfortunately if you ask me), we were prepared for this inevitability, and soon Nagato had taken over the responsibility of being the interpreter.

Upon hearing what Nagato had said, James Randi smiled, appearing amused by Haruhi's statement. "I had no idea that I was so popular. I've never had anyone declare war on me before. I'm not really sure how I should respond. May I ask why you're declaring war on me and my organization?"

After hearing Nagato's interpretation, Haruhi responded. "We know that you're purposefully withholding the truth from the world! You are intentionally ensuring that no one is able to succeed at winning your so-called prize!"

"I see," answer Mr. Randi upon hearing the interpretation. "Well, since you seem so convinced that I'm not playing fair, perhaps you can take the opportunity and present to us some evidence that I am wrong. Hey, maybe you'll be the lucky ones to win the prize."

Haruhi appeared slightly disappointed that she didn't have anything to show him, thanks to our failure to find anything during our trip. "Don't worry! We'll find something someday! The very purpose of our club is to go and seek out mysterious phenomenon anywhere we can find them! One of these days we'll show you!"

It should be noted that at this point, a group of four security officers were now heading our way, two from my side and two of Koizumi's. This is where the strategic positioning of the two of us comes into play. Our job, quite simply, was to stall the security personnel for as long as we possibly could while Haruhi continued her banter with the famous skeptic. It wasn't a brilliant plan, seeing as all four men were easily bigger than either Koizumi or myself.

"Is that so?" asked James Randi who noticed the security guards approaching. "That's quite a club you've got."

In preparation for the assault that was about to begin, I braced myself by holding out my hands. As the guards reached me, one of them grabbed me by my arm while the other tried to get around me. I prevented this by grabbing onto his shirt with all my might.

"I can't accept that the world is as boring and ordinary as you say it is!" yelled Haruhi.

"What so wrong about the world the way it is?" retorted the old man.

Um, Haruhi? Can you please get to the point? I can't hold these guys off much longer. I found myself quickly becoming overpowered and my grip on the one security officer was beginning to weaken. I noticed that Koizumi was also struggling to hold off the two men. He maybe in better shape than me, but even he has his limits. Asahina-san began to cower at the sight of the two large men to whom Koizumi was failing to hold off.

Haruhi stared down the famous skeptic intensely before yelling one last thing. "Wouldn't the world be more interesting if there were things like psychics, magic, and aliens? Don't you ever wish that there was more to this world than what we see everyday?"

Mr. Randi's expression softened ever so slightly upon hearing the question. "I would agree. The world would be more interesting and exciting if those things existed, and sometimes I do wish that those things were real. Unfortunately, I've never seen any reason to

believe that they are real, and I cannot assume that they are until I do."

If only you knew, Randi-san. If only you knew…

"If you truly feel inclined to search the world for the paranormal and supernatural, then I wish you the best of luck. And who knows. Maybe you'll succeed some day and make a million dollars in the process."

Haruhi appeared surprised by the old man's response and seemed unable to think of anything else to say. It was at this point that I lost my grip on the one security guard. He then went and grabbed Haruhi by her arm and began to pull her away. Before long, all five of us had been nabbed and were being escorted out of the convention hall.

"Be sure to thank our guests for their time," said Mr. Randi as we were dragged out the door, with the sound of laughter coming from the audience after the comment.

A minute later, the five of us were now standing outside the convention center. I was leaning against the wall to try and catch my breath. Haruhi stood triumphantly with a confident smirk on her face.

"I'd say that the mission was a complete success!"

"What are you talking about?" I asked. "What was so successful about that?"

"Didn't you hear what he said?" asked Haruhi. "He agreed with me when I said the world would be more interesting if the paranormal existed. He practically admitted defeat!"

I placed a hand on my face. Only a girl like her would think that we won anything by humiliating ourselves here in the convention center.

It was then Haruhi took out her phone to look at the time. "Well, we've done everything we've set out to do out here. The train is

going to leave from here in a few hours. It's best if we get back to hotel and check out. The sooner we get back, the sooner we can rest before school tomorrow."

I couldn't help but notice that her voice sounded a bit disappointed that the trip was now over. A few minutes later, we made out way onto a bus and made our way back to the hotel.

The trip was now over, for the most part. Everyone had gathered their things and had checked out of the hotel. We were now on another bus heading towards the train station. My melancholy was now in full swing. Why? Because I knew what was going to happen when I returned from the trip. Haruhi was going to ask me about how I felt about her, and I was going to have to tell her the truth about me moving away the next day. No doubt that Haruhi was going to respond poorly to hearing the news, and the so-called terrible event that the older Asahina-san told me about would happen. The problem was that I didn't have a clue how I would fix things when everything finally fell apart.

There was one thing that had me confused, though. The older Asahina-san said that something bad was going to happen during the trip, not after it. It's unusual for her to get her facts mixed up, especially since her younger self was right here witnessing what was happening. Did she simply forget? It seemed weird. As far as I could tell, there was no reason to believe that anything would happen before we were to leave Kyoto.

We soon arrived at the bus station, and we all got off with our luggage in hand. As the five of us made our way towards the door, I heard the ringtone of Haruhi's cellphone going off.

Haruhi picked up the phone and looked at it. "It's my parents. They're probably just calling to check on me. You guys go on inside. I'll catch up."

We complied with Haruhi's wishes and made our way inside the train station. Once inside, I noticed Koizumi walking up next to me. "Have you figured out what you're going to do?"

I reluctantly told him my plan. "When we get back, I'm going to tell her that I'm moving. I'm hoping I can tell her in a way that'll soften the blow."

"Are you absolutely sure that's the best idea? It's not too late, you know? You still have other options."

"I can't," I replied weakly. "Now that Haruhi's confessed to me, I don't think things can ever really be the same. It's best if I leave before things get even worse."

Koizumi didn't reply. I didn't really expect him to. No doubt he expected the worst to happen when we returned. I felt bad that things had to be this way. No, bad is an understatement. It almost killed me inside to think that I was going to have to do this. Dammit, why couldn't things go back to the way they were before I found out my family was going to move? Life seemed so much simpler then.

I looked up to see the expression on Koizumi's face only to find a surprise. Koizumi was now looking out towards the entrance of the train station. His eyes had widened in a look of horror that I don't think I've ever seen on his face. What's more, both Asahina-san and Nagato were also staring towards the entrance. Asahina-san had appeared practically frightened. Nagato's expression wasn't as severe, but I could see that her eyes had widened ever so slightly more than usual. Something was wrong. Something was very, very wrong…

I then realized that the direction that the three of them were looking was right where Haruhi was standing outside when she got that phone call from her parents. I reacted immediately the moment I figured that out and bolted right for the door. When I got outside, I was disturbed to find that Haruhi was not there. I began to look around frantically for her, but she was nowhere to be seen.

It was then that I spotted something on the ground. It was Haruhi's cellphone. It picked it and checked to see of anyone was still on the line. When I realized that there wasn't, I went through her cellphone and immediately dialed the number to her parent's house. The phone only rang once before it was picked up.

"Haru-chan, is that you?" asked the sweet but obviously distraught voice of Naru-san.

"It's me," I answered. "What happened?"

From the sound of her voice, she sounded as if it was on the verge of tears. "K… Kyon-kun… I'm so sorry…"

I felt my heart racing upon hearing those words. What did you say to her, Naru-san? Please don't tell me you told her what I think you did…

"I… I let it slip. I told her that you're moving away tomorrow."

I felt my blood run cold. I couldn't believe she did that. How can anyone be so terrible at keeping their mouth shut? There was no doubt that Haruhi must have been feeling a tremendous amount of emotional pain right now. The look on the faces of the other Brigade members was proof of that.

"Where's Haru-chan? Is she okay? Where'd she go?"

"I'm sorry, Naru-san. I have to go," I said almost robotically as I hung up the phone and placed it in my pocket.

By now, the other three had caught up and were right behind me.

"What happened?" asked Koizumi.

I turned around and looked all three of them before responding. "Naru-san… accidentally let it slip while talking to Haruhi."

Asahina-san appeared confused. "Wha… what are you talking about, Kyon-kun? What did she let slip?"

I had completely forgotten that Asahina-san and Nagato were still in the dark about what was going on. I hung my head shamefully before answering. "Tomorrow… I'm moving back with my parents. Today was going to be the last day I was going to spend with you guys. I didn't bother to tell anyone because I didn't want to ruin the trip."

Asahina-san was in obvious shock when she heard the news. As my words were absorbed into her brain, I could see tears beginning to well up in her eyes. "Y… you… you meanie!" She then grabbed onto my shirt, tugging weakly on it. The tears began to flow from her eyes. "How could you do that to us? How could you not tell us the truth? How could you do that when you know how Suzumiya-san feels about you? How could you hurt her like that? How could you be so mean?"

Asahina-san words were like a dagger being driven into my chest. She was right. What I had done was pretty selfish. I real reason I didn't say anything wasn't for the sake of the Brigade, but because I couldn't find it within myself to be honest with everyone. The guilt and shame I had felt a moment ago had just gone up exponentially. I couldn't believe things could go this bad so quickly.

I tried my best to regain my composure. "We need to find her. She can't have gone far."

"We can't do that," responded Koizumi.

"Why not?" I yelled.

Koizumi turned towards Nagato, an indication that she must know something. A moment afterward, Nagato began to speak.

"Suzumiya-san is no longer contained with the boundaries of this three-dimensional space."

"Wait. What? What do you mean?" I asked.

"It's happening again. I can feel it," answered Koizumi. "Suzumiya-san is no longer a part of this world. Just like what happened one year ago, Suzumiya-san has gone and begun the process of recreating our world."

Are you kidding me? Already? Isn't she overreacting a bit?

"We don't have much time," said Koizumi as he stepped over to the edge of the street and help out his hand. A few seconds later, the same limousine from last night pulled up to us. "Get in."

Everyone quickly entered the vehicle. I couldn't see who was driving it, but it was only natural to assume that it was Arakawa-san again. Once the limousine began to take off I turned back to Koizumi with more questions. "Okay, so why the hell is Haruhi recreating the world? Isn't that a bit much?"

Koizumi folded his hands in front of him before answering. "Can you tell me what happened the last time Suzumiya-san decided she wanted to recreate the world?"

Sure. If I remember correctly, Haruhi got bored with the way the world was, and so she decided to bring me along with her into a brand new world that would be more to her liking… wait a minute! I then realized something disturbing.

"The last time Haruhi tried to recreate the world, she brought me along with her. Why am I not with her right now?"

Koizumi was silent for about a minute before he gave me as answer. "It's only speculation, but if I'm right, you're not going to like what I'm going to tell you."

What? What are you talking about? Just tell me already!

"The last time Suzumiya-san wanted to recreate the world, it was due to her dissatisfaction with this world. This time, her reasons are very different. When Suzumiya-san heard the truth about you moving away, there's no doubt that she must have felt deeply betrayed by your actions. She realizes now that she can't be with you and is starting to experience heartbreak for the first time in her life."

"What are you saying?" I asked, growing ever more fearful of his answer.

"Her pain is so great now that she's willing to do whatever it takes to remove herself from that pain, even if that means removing the very source of her pain from the universe."

I began to realize where he was going with his explanation, and the sensation of absolute terror began to work its way through my body. I felt my throat become dry, and my hands became wet. My heart was racing as my fight or flight response was now in full gear.

"In other words, she's going to remake the world… without you in it…"

Well that's not good. Boy Kyon, you sure screwed up this time. What the hell are you going to do now?

The next chapter should be a really short one, so hopefully it won't take long before I have it up. In any case, I hope you're excited for the climax. We're almost there!

Oh and don't forget about the poll on my profile page. Please be sure to vote! Thank you!

Chapter 27

It's been too long since I updated quickly, so here I'm going to try and get myself back on track. This chapter is a lot shorter than most, so it didn't take long to write. Sorry about that, but I felt it was necessary to keep the tension up.

Thank you very much for all your reviews and for voting on my poll. I'm happy to see that nobody voted "I think they both suck." I saw that Naru barely squeaked past Oruki at first, but then that bastard shot past her and is in the lead. Damn him…

Oh, and I wanted to explain one last thing before the chapter begins. In this story, I am assuming that Arakawa is not an esper. He is part of the Organization, but has no actual powers. My justification for this is the fact that his full name is never revealed, and so far in the canon, only people who have powers have their full names revealed.

Anyway, please enjoy the chapter!

Chapter 27

It goes without saying that my life is completely unfair.

Most heroes that you see on TV, manga or games have to save the world by doing stuff like pulling the Master Sword from the altar before they go off to slay the evil Ganondorf. I, on the other hand, am hardly that kind of hero. There isn't any evil for me to vanquish, and I am armed with nothing more than my wits.

And yet the world is about to end and I'm the only one who can stop it… and I'm failing miserably.

I'm back at the convention center. All those people that had filled up the seats only mere hours ago were now gone, as well as that old

fart that we wanted to see. It was empty, dark and bleak. The only other soul in here with me was Koizumi, or what was left of him. His features were quickly fading, and his entire body was covered in a reddish glow.

"It doesn't seem like she will appear," remarked the esper, his voice giving hints of mild gloom.

I was sitting on the edge of the stage at the convention center, my face buried in my hands. I was now the picture of complete despair. I couldn't understand what went wrong. I was so sure that this was the right place.

Why aren't you here, Haruhi?

To understand why it is that I ended up at the convention center with a reddish glowing Koizumi, I need to backtrack to about an hour ago. I was now riding in a limousine along with Asahina-san, Nagato and Koizumi. I had just finished listening to some rather disturbing news.

"Wait, are you saying I'm going to die?"

That was me. I had just been told that Haruhi was on the verge of recreating the universe again, only this time the only change she was going to make was that I would be removed from it entirely.

"It's hard to say what will happen to you when the universe is remade," answered Koizumi. "I can think of two possibilities. Either the universe will be remade so that you merely disappear from our present point in time, or it will be remade so that you never existed in it at all. So to answer your question, you'll either die in the more traditional sense, or you'll never have lived."

What the hell? If Haruhi loves me so damn much, why is she so willing to remove me from existence? It doesn't make any sense, just like everything else involving that girl!

"Perhaps she feels that if she cannot have you then no one else can, or she feels that she was better off never meeting you. In the former case, you'll at least have lived at some point, right?"

You're acting awfully carefree for someone who knows that the universe is about to be destroyed and remade.

Koizumi chuckled lightly upon hearing me say that, his annoying smile ever present. "Am I? If I had to be honest, I'm rather terrified. If you were with Suzumiya-san right now, I might feel secure in the fact that you could do something about the situation, but since you're stuck out here with us…" His voice trailed off after that.

I turned to Nagato for some answers. "Is there anything we can do?"

"Before we are able to assess the situation, we must arrive at the epicenter of the temporal distortion. There are many uncertain factors that will determine the probability of success, but even if all factors work in our favor, probability of success is low."

Thanks for the bode of confidence, Nagato. I feel so much better now.

I turned to Asahina-san for some more answers, even though I suspected I wasn't going to get any.

"I'm sorry, Kyon-kun. I'm afraid I am in the dark myself as to what is happening. Anything I could tell you is classified information. I… I… can't contact… classified information…"

That's really, really bad news. If Asahina-san is unable to contact the people who were her superiors, then that would mean that it is because this universe ceased to exist. Please don't tell me we're doomed.

"In any case," said Koizumi, his hand returning to the folded position in front of his face. "Nagato-san is correct. We must travel to the center of where the alternate universe is being created. Perhaps

once we are there, we will be able to enter it, although if things are like they were last time, it would seem unlikely."

The four of us were silent for the next five minutes while the limo continued to drive towards our destination. It wasn't long before I noticed that we were coming upon some familiar scenery within the city. We were coming close to where the hotel we stayed at was.

A minute later, the limousine came to a stop inside an alleyway not far from the hotel. The four of us quickly exited the vehicle and gathered around where Koizumi and Nagato walked to.

"It is here," said Koizumi as he looked up at what appeared to be nothing.

"So you can't just walk in?" I asked, realizing that it was probably a stupid question.

Koizumi put his hand up against what appeared to be air. "I have strong doubts about it. It's worth a try, at least. We have nothing to lose." He then turned to the three of us. "Everyone close their eyes and grab a hold of my shirt. Be sure not to let go."

The three of us complied with his wishes and did as he told. While holding onto his shirt, I could hear the sounds of what appeared to be audible grunting on the part of Koizumi. After about a minute, I heard a loud exhalation from him.

"I'm sorry… I can't do it…"

I opened my eyes to see that we were still in the real world. I hung my head, feeling a strong sense of anguish.

It was then that I heard a female voice from behind me. "Perhaps we can help."

I turned around to find that Mori-san and Arakawa-san were standing near the limo. I also saw the Tamaru brothers as well, their police

vehicle parked next to the limo. It should be noted that the brothers were still dressed as police officers, and Mori-san was dressed in the same office-lady attire that she wore when she chased down the kidnappers who nabbed Asahina-san a few months back. The four of them approached us quickly.

"We don't have much time," said Mori-san. "Perhaps if the four of us channel our powers together, we may be able to pierce the barrier and enter the alternate dimension."

"It's worth a try," said Koizumi. "Although we had more of us here the last time we did it."

"It can't be helped," said Mori-san regretfully. "By the time the others reached this location, it would be too late."

"Then I guess we should get started," said Koizumi as he turned around to face the empty space again.

Mori-san gave me an extremely sharp glare. It was almost scary. "You screwed up pretty bad this time. You better hope this works. You're the one who has to fix things."

Hearing her words only further built up the incredible level of anxiety that was inside me. If it wasn't for the fact that she was so scary to look at, I might have screamed at her face to shut up and leave me alone. Dammit, I'm starting to lose it.

Mori-san and the Tamaru brothers positioned themselves around Koizumi, myself and the others as they held their hands forward. We were asked to close our eyes and to hold onto Koizumi's shirt again as the process started. This time we heard grunting noises from all four people as they tried once again to break through. However, during this attempt we heard a light crackling noise that sounded something like arcing electricity.

"I… I don't think it's going to work!" yelled Koizumi.

"Concentrate harder! It has to work!" screamed Mori-san.

The noises around me became considerably louder and louder, tempting me to open my eyes. I resisted the temptation, fearing that perhaps opening my eyes might screw things up. The grunting noises were now very loud, an indication that the four of them were putting everything they had into it.

It was then that I felt Koizumi lurch forward a bit. "Al… almost there…"

A few seconds later, I felt the esper's body leap forward. I almost lost my grip on him as I moved forward to keep hold. I suddenly lost my balance and fell forward, landing on the hard concrete. I instinctively opened my eyes to see where I was.

The three other remaining Brigade members were now all on the ground with me. There were no traces of Mori-san or the other people who were a part of the Organization. The sky had become the familiar dull grey that I had seen several times before. I turned to Koizumi to see him heavily winded. "Are you okay?"

"I'm alright," answered the esper before taking one last deep breath. "I'm actually surprised that worked. I suspect that we were successful because we acted so quickly. Had we waited a few more minutes, the boundary between the two worlds would've been impassable for the four of us. Let's just be glad that we're in."

After that, the four of us stood up and began to look around at our surroundings. Like the previous closed spaces, this place was devoid of any signs of life, other than ourselves. It was like the entire city of Kyoto had become an oversized ghost-town.

"How large is this space?" I asked.

"By now, it's roughly the size of the entire city, and is still growing," answered Koizumi.

"Th… this place is really scary," said Asahina-san fearfully. I had forgotten that this was likely the first time that either Asahina-san or Nagato had ever been inside anything resembling normal closed space. This place was vastly different from the other spaces we had entered together before.

"We'll be fine," said Koizumi. "I don't think we'll run into any Shinjin in this space. However, we cannot dawdle. Our primary objective is to locate Suzumiya-san."

That sounded easy enough. There's just one major problem. We had an entire city to search. She could be anywhere. It's like trying to find a needle in a hay stack.

"We should try and eliminate the most likely locations first," said Koizumi. "We'll start our search at the hotel."

I went and turned to Nagato. "Do you have any idea where Haruhi is?"

Nagato lightly shook her head. "I am unable to detect any data other than what my auditory and optical sensors pick up, nor am I able to manipulate any data in this space."

So in other words, Nagato is about as powerless as an ordinary human right now. Great…

Since the hotel was not far from our location, we were quick to run over to where it was. Getting inside and past security was a non-issue, and I was relieved to find that the elevators still worked. We exited the elevator and made our way immediately to where our rooms were. We knocked on both doors but received no answer. Since we no longer had the keys to our rooms anymore, Koizumi and I were forced to break down both doors, which was rather painful on my shoulder. I wasn't bothered about the destruction of private property. If we succeeded, this space would disappear, and if we failed, I would disappear. Either way, I had no accountability.

We checked the girls' room first, and after finding that room empty, checked the boys' room next. When we managed to open the door, I was frustrated to find it empty as well. I was growing extremely annoyed now as my rage slowly began to boil to the surface. I sat down on what was my bed and rubbed my face.

"We need to keep moving," said Koizumi. "She's not here."

With that being said, the last vestiges of my composure broke down, and I went and grabbed a nearby lamp. Using all my strength, I picked it up and threw it with all my might at the window. Both the lamp and the window shattered, causing some of the pieces to fly outside while some landed onto the carpet of the room.

"Dammit! I can't take this!" I yelled at the top of my lungs. "It's… it's too much! Why does it have to be me?! I didn't ask for any of this!"

The other three were silent as they watched me vent my anger. Asahina-san cowered a bit, perhaps worried that I might take my anger out on them.

I sat back down on the bed and put my hand to my face again. "It's not fair. What did I do to deserve this? Everyone says it's my fault, but… but how could I've known that this would happen? I didn't want to leave, but that bastard Oruki was forcing me to. What was I to do? I didn't think things would get this bad."

There was silence in the room for another minute before Koizumi spoke. "Regardless of whose fault this is, we need to keep moving. It's not too late to make things right. You're the only one who can do it though."

I took a deep breath after hearing those words before calming down enough to want to move on. Just as I was about to stand up, I heard the sound of whimpering coming from Asahina-san. I looked up to find a horrible sight. Asahina-san's hands had begun to glow with a strange pink light. The young time-traveler had a look of terror on her face as she watched the light slowly move up her arms.

"Wha… what's happening to me?"

"Not good," said Koizumi, obviously knowing what was happening.

I bolted up to Koizumi and grabbed him by his collar. "What's happening to Asahina-san?"

Nagato was the one to answer my question. "The alternate space is beginning to reject foreign data."

"What does that mean?" I asked fearfully.

"It means," said the esper, "that this space is in the process of removing us from it. I suspect that Suzumiya-san has a great desire to be alone, and anything that might potentially disturb her would be kicked out."

That was really, really bad. If that means what I think it means, then it means that it won't be long before we all are taken away from this alternate reality. If that were to happen before we found Haruhi, then the universe was doomed and I would be sentenced to a life of nonexistence, as ironic as that would be.

Acting as quickly as I could, I grabbed Asahina-san by the hand and began to run out the door. "Follow me! I know another place we can look!"

I then dragged Asahina-san toward the door leading to the stairs where Haruhi and I ran up last night, with the other two chasing us from behind. Pushing myself as hard as I could, I ran up the steps and made it to the roof. I ran out to the edge where Haruhi confessed to me. She was not there. I looked over the edge of the roof and looked around. I had a great view of the streets below, but I didn't see anything that remotely looked like Haruhi. Just for good measure, I called out her name. "Haruhi!"

"Suzumiya-san!" yelled Asahina-san as well. It was a futile effort, though. It was highly doubtful that she was within earshot.

"I have an idea," said Koizumi. "It's a bit risky, but I think I can get away with it for a few minutes." He then began to activate his esper powers, causing that glowing red energy to appear around him. Asahina-san was startled to see him do this and stepped back a bit. A second later, he took off into the sky at lightning speed. My guess was that he was going to search the city from above in order to see if he could find her from above.

It was then that I heard the fearful cry of Asahina-san. "Nagato-san…"

I turned towards Nagato to find that her hands had also begun to glow, this time with a soft, lavender light. By now, the pink glow had completely enveloped Asahina-san. We were running out of time. I took both girls by their hands and bolted down the stairs. We exited the hotel as quickly as we could, and I began to lead them in the direction of the restaurant we had visited for breakfast both today and yesterday morning. Empty.

I was trying to decide where to go to next, but before I could, Koizumi landed right in front of us. After catching his breath a bit, he gave us a brief report. "I'm afraid I didn't see her. I gave a pretty thorough look around the immediate area. I'm quite certain that she's not around here."

"Do you have enough left in you to look again?" I asked.

He shook his head regretfully. "It was all I could do just to return back here. I'm afraid I have to stick with being on foot from here on out."

Dammit! Where the hell is she? Think! If I were an insane high school junior who had just had her heart broken, where would I go?

Before I could have my question answered, Asahina-san collapsed onto the ground.

"Asahina-san!" I screamed as I ran up to her. By now, I could no longer make out any of the features of her face. "Are you okay?

Speak to me!"

"I… I'm sorry I wasn't much help," said Asahina-san. "Please don't give up, Kyon-kun. We're counting on you…" It was then that her body shriveled into a ball of pink light before fading into nothing.

"Asahina-san? Asahina-san!" I screamed as I began to freak out.

Koizumi grabbed me by the shoulders. "Calm down. She's fine. She's just been returned to the real world. We have to hurry."

Regaining my composure, I stood and took a deep breath. "Did you check that one restaurant we went to last night?" After seeing Koizumi shake his head, I took the lead. "We'll head there next. It's closer than anywhere else I can think of."

We began to run towards where the restaurant was. It was a good three blocks away, and by the time we got there, I was very winded. Unfortunately, there was no one there as well.

I banged my hand on the glass window in frustration. "Dammit! We're never going to find her!"

I then noticed Nagato collapsing onto the ground next. I rushed to her as well, fearing the worst. "Nagato! Not you too!"

The lavender light completely removed all her features as well by now. She looked up at me and opened what appeared to be the last remnants of her mouth. She spoke only one word. "Book…" She then faded away in the exact same way as Asahina-san.

I didn't have a chance to mourn the loss of Nagato. Her last word hit me like a ton of bricks. I'd been in such a panic in the last hour that I'd completely forgotten about the book of Haikus that Nagato gave me all those weeks ago. What was that Haiku again? How did it go?

When confronting her.

He held on the stage's edge.

He then let it go.

Wait, there's more to this. What was it that the older Asahina-san told me? I think it was…

" **I can't tell you any more, except this. There will be a location that will be of great importance to Suzumiya-san out in Kyoto. You won't realize it right away, but I urge you to pay attention during your trip. When the time comes, you'll find her there."**

Okay, so let's think. There are two clues here. The older Asahina-san told me that there was a place important to her that she would be at. That much I've figured out. It was Nagato's clue that was harder to figure out. I figured out that it was me confronting Haruhi. What I didn't get were the second and third verses. There was one word that was very confusing, and it was the word *stage's* . Was that some kind of metaphor? Wait, what if it's not a metaphor? Maybe it's meant to literally mean a stage. Now what stage could possibly be important to Haruhi here in Kyoto? That's it! I know where she is!

I felt an incredible sensation of euphoria hit me when I realized the answer. I couldn't believe I hadn't thought of it before. It was so obvious. "She's at the convention center!"

"Are you sure?" asked Koizumi.

"Yes!" I said loudly as I turned to face him. It was then that I noticed that his hands were now glowing red. "Koizumi!"

"Don't worry about me," he said as he began to look about. "The convention center is too far away to run. We'd never make it if we did." His eyes then darted towards a nearby car that was sitting in the middle of the road. "Follow me!"

We then ran up to the car, with Koizumi jumping into the driver's side. I could only assume that his training with the Organization must have involved learning how to drive at some point. The keys were

still in the ignition when we got inside, and the car started up right away when Koizumi turned the key.

"There are a lot of cars in the middle of the road, so this is going to be a bumpy ride."

Before I was actually ready, the car sped off at speeds that were definitely not safe on city streets. Since there were numerous cars blocking the roads, most of the driving had to be done on the sidewalk. This made me less than comfortable, and as a result, I decided it was best to try and close my eyes while we made our way there. Damn you, Koizumi! If you get us killed, I'm so going to kick your ass!

It was then that I felt my body suddenly lurch forward, an indication that the car had stopped. I opened my eyes to see that we had finally made it to the convention center. I also noticed that Koizumi's whole body was now glowing red.

Koizumi gave me a reassuring smile. "I'm still hanging in there. Hurry and go inside."

I didn't hesitate to listen to him. I bolted from the car and ran directly inside the convention center. I wasted no time heading straight into the auditorium where we confronted James Randi only mere hours ago.

When I opened the door, I immediately cried out her name. "Haruhi!"

I then looked around the room to find it was empty. Not a soul anywhere to be seen. Confused, I ran up to the stage and climbed up onto it and looked around. "Haruhi!"

My cries were not answered. There was no one in the room except me. I was completely bewildered by this turn of events. Why wasn't she here? This was the place, wasn't it? I looked around the room for at least another minute before I collapsed onto the hard wood

floor of the stage. She wasn't here, and I had no idea why. I was so sure this was the place.

And that bring us to where we were now. Koizumi entered the room a minute later and took a seat next to me on the edge of the stage. By now, I could no longer make out his face. It would not be long before he too faded from this world.

"There are two possibilities," said Koizumi. "Either Suzumiya-san will eventually return to this location, or this isn't where Suzumiya-san is at, and she had no intention of coming here."

I didn't respond to what he said. I felt way too defeated to say anything. I was so sure that this was it. Were the clues wrong, or did I make a mistake?

"My time is up," said Koizumi as he began to look up towards the ceiling. "All we can do now is rely on you. I'm counting on you. We all are…"

With that, Koizumi's body shriveled up and faded away as well. I was now alone. This fact was enough to force me to break down into tears of anguish. I was completely sure now that I had failed. I had no idea where Haruhi was, and it was only a matter of time before the world and my life would end. If only I could see her one last time. If only I could explain myself. I had no idea what I'd say to her, but I had to say something.

I went and wiped my tears from my eyes, but when I did so, I noticed a strange blue light that nearly burned my eyes. It was then that I noticed it. My hands… they were starting to glow as well…

Baka Kyon! You really screwed up this time. Will he be able to find Haruhi, or is it too late? The climax to this story is coming up next! I hope you're excited for it!

I have a request to make, though. You all know that I rarely do this, and it's a bit embarrassing to ask but… I'm hoping that as many of you as possible could review this chapter and all the ones that come after. My reasons for asking are kinda stupid and selfish, but the truth is that I really want this fic to reach the 1000 review mark.

I know, it's dumb, but it'd be really awesome if we could work together to do it! I promise to respond to every review if you do so. That'll be my end of the bargain. I'm looking forward to reading some reviews from some new readers or from people who have never reviewed before. I'm counting on all of you!

Thank you very much!

Chapter 28

I can't believe I'm finally writing this chapter. I remember thinking up the events of these last few chapters quite a while ago, but it seemed like it'd take forever to get to this point. By now, I've had the scenes play out in my head so many times that I've almost forgotten how awesome I felt when I first thought it up. I'm very confident you guys will think it's awesome, too!

For those of you who are wondering, the reason this chapter was so delayed was for three reasons: One, school was in the way and I couldn't start this fic until it was out of the way. Two, I was having a great deal of anxiety with this chapter, since I wanted it to be perfect, and three, I had received an Xbox 360 and a Nintendo DSi, and I had a ton of games to play on it. Sooooo, GOMENASAI!!!!

I'd to especially call attention to Xipz and Nix Ginevra Black for their numerous reviews in support of this fic. Thank you for spamming away the review section. :P

Here it is, guys and gals. The moment you (may or may not) have been waiting for.

Chapter 28

It's been a long time since I cried. They say that it's not manly to ever cry, unless you're under the most extreme of circumstances, such as losing a loved one. Well, I was about to lose the universe, and my own life. Does that count? I have no idea…

The last time I cried… I think it was a few years ago when I discovered my cousin making out with that deadbeat. I think I tried really hard to bury that emotion ever since. The memory was too

painful at the time. Looking back at it now, it seemed really childish to be so sad and depressed over such a thing. Surely my problems were significantly greater now… Why did things have to be like this?

These were the thoughts that were going through my mind when I was sitting at the edge of the stage at the convention center, desperately hoping that Haruhi would show up. By now, the bluish light had taken over my forearms. I continued to stare at my hands as they glowed, tears dropping onto my hands. I noticed that my hand was growing slightly numb. I only wished that my emotions could be just as numb.

I was beginning to give up on Haruhi showing up as I watched my leg dangle only a few centimeters from the ground. If I pointed my toes a bit, I could reach the floor. I briefly wondered why the stage seemed a little low to the ground.

I then remembered something that confused me a bit. If the things in that haiku were meant to be taken literally, then how could I possibly hang from the edge of this stage? It wasn't far enough off the ground… not even by a long shot. What kind of stage would be high enough off the ground for me to…

I then felt an overwhelming desire to hit myself in the head. How could I be so incredibly stupid? The answer seemed so immensely obvious that it's a wonder why I would make such a silly mistake. I briefly thought about Koizumi's stupid theory and thought to myself that if anyone was reading this happening, they would probably think I was a moron by now.

The answer, and the place where Haruhi is currently located, is none other than the Kiyomizu-dera!

It was nice that I knew where it was located now, but there was one major problem. It is quite a distance away, and my body is looking more and more like it is flavored Blue Hawaii.

I bolted out of the convention center and began to look around the area for some means of getting there as fast as I could. There was the car that Koizumi drove to get here, but I didn't know how to drive. It was too risky getting behind the wheel of that thing for the first time. Running there would be too slow, and I don't think I have the stamina to do so. I have to find some other means of getting there.

I began running around the streets looking for something… anything that could get me there before I was removed from this space. I then spotted a bicycle off in the distance, about a block away. I shot out towards it with all the speed that I could muster, hoping that the bike wasn't chained up or broken. When I made it to the bike, I was relieved to find that it was free, and it appeared to be in working condition. However, there was a minor problem. It was a rather small bike, similar to the one that I had a few years back. I knew I could still use it, but it was going to be uncomfortable and unwieldy. It didn't matter to me anymore, so I climbed up on it and began to pedal away with all my might.

In hindsight, I don't remember how I was able to figure out which way to go. I knew it was north east from where I was, but without the sun to give me an idea of where it could be, I had to rely on pure instinct and memorization. I had looked at a map of Kyoto many times over the course of the last week, and had a general idea of where to go, but the specifics were lost to me. Whatever… I'll figure out the rest when I get there.

It was then that I felt a drop of water hit the back of my neck. I looked up in confusion and felt another one hit my forehead. I was a bit bewildered, considering the fact that it never rained in all the times I entered any kind of alternate reality. The drops came harder and harder until the rain was pouring hard. I suspected that Haruhi had something to do with this. Perhaps it was symbolic of her current emotional state. If I was correct, it meant of course that I was definitely not going to meet a happy Haruhi if I managed to get to her… not that I really believed that was possible anyway.

Most people with any hint of sanity would avoid biking in this kind of weather. The water was building up far too quickly for the asphalt and drainage systems to absorb it. Too make matters worse, a lot of the path was uphill, making the road difficult to climb. In other words, it was an arduous task, and it was difficult to control the bike. The fact that my knees kept hitting the handle bars was annoying. Worst of all, I had this feeling of déjà vu in the back of my head. For some reason, this moment felt all but too familiar.

It was then that the bike hit something hard on the ground and lost control. I had only a half a second to figure out what it might have been before I hit the ground hard. My hand did its best to soften the blow, but I was still hit with a great deal of pain. It was all I could do to keep myself from rolling back down the hill. I groaned in pain, half worried that I had seriously hurt myself. The water that was landing on my body and rolling down the hill soaked and gave me an unbearable chill. When I attempted to get up, I felt a sharp pain in my wrist that I had landed on. I had little doubt that I had sprained it. No, that doesn't matter. I had to get up and keep going.

When I got the bike back up, I noticed that it was a pot hole that I ran over. No doubt the enormous amount of water going down the hill was what obscured it from my vision. I ignored my lack of luck and got on the bike again. I did my best to ignore the pain and took off again, feeling like I was racing hard on Snake Way in order to save the world.

By the time I finally figured out that I was close, the bluish light had completely enveloped my body, and I felt numb and weak at the same time. I could tell that it was more than mere muscle fatigue that was affecting my body. It was as if my very essence was being sucked from my body. It took every last ounce of my willpower to continue to turn the pedals on the bike.

My elation grew greatly when I saw the temple in the distance. I was almost there. Unfortunately, I still wasn't sure if I could make it before my body was removed from this space. I was thankful enough that I was rejected from the space at a much slower rate than the other

Brigade members, but was it enough? And even if I did reach Haruhi, would that prevent me from being removed from this reality? The way I understood it, the only way that I could possibly stay in this space was if Haruhi wanted me to, and there was definitely no guarantee that I'd be able to. In any case, I knew my time was running out.

Man did I wish that I had a pair of Mercury's Winged Shoes right about now.

When I finally reached the entrance of the temple, my weakness had grown to the point where I could barely get off the bike without falling off of it again. When I did get off, I made my way across the temple grounds as quickly as I could. I wish I could've said that I was moving with great swiftness and grace towards her, but due to my condition, it was more like a lazy jog. I was careful not to trip over those wretched Love Rocks as I move forward, climbing several flights of stairs along the way.

Just as I was about to reach the stage, my legs gave out from both the exhaustion and weakness. As my body splashed onto the wet ground, I could see that the features of my body were now nothing more than a blue outline. Gasping for breath, I began my earnest attempt to pull myself to my feet, but I was horribly dismayed to find that my body no longer had the strength to do so. No! This can't be! Not when I'm so freaking close!

I looked out towards the stage to see if anyone was in sight. It was a waste though, as my eyesight had become incredibly blurry by now. I had no idea if Haruhi was there or not. I couldn't see her, and I couldn't move any further. There was only one option left. I'd have to call out to her. Maybe, just maybe, she could hear me. I was soon reminded of that terribly freakish dream I had of Ryoko possessing that stupid wooden turtle and trying to kill me. I made every attempt I could to get a hold of Haruhi, but it failed. Well, I couldn't fail this time. I had to try to call out to her, even if it's only once. With the rain pouring down as hard as it was, I knew my chances were slim, but there were no other options.

I took the deepest breath I could muster and screamed out her name one last time…

I heard nothing. There appeared to be no indication that anyone had heard me. I gazed outward, hoping that perhaps my fading eyesight could pick up something, anything. It was then that I noticed that my eye sight wasn't fading at all. In fact, it was actually improving. With every passing second, my vision cleared, and before long my eyesight had returned to normal. Not only that, but much of the fatigue that had all but sapped the last of my strength was also rapidly disappearing. I could now stand back up on my feet, and I wasted no time in doing so. I was also quick to find that my body was no longer glowing blue anymore. Did I do it? Am I now safe from being removed from this space?

I knew immediately why. Haruhi was there, and she must have heard me! If you were to ask me why it was that I was no longer in danger of being removed from this alternate space, I wasn't really sure. My best guess was perhaps that Haruhi subconsciously wanted to see me or hear what I had to say. In any case, I knew that the only way I would find out was if I ran to her. It didn't take long before I made it onto the stage of the Kiyomizu-dera. Almost immediately, I saw her.

Standing at the edge of the stage and looking outward was Haruhi Suzumiya.

I had felt an enormous amount of relief when I found her there. I had secretly hoped that the hard part was now over and that with talking to her, I could calm her down and perhaps end the upcoming disaster. I slowly approached her, giving myself a little time to think about what I would say. Looking at her, I could tell that she was every bit as soaked from the rain as I was. No matter how close I came, she didn't move a muscle. It was as if she was a statue, forever staring out over the city and the mountains beyond. If it weren't for the fact that she had prevented me from being kicked from this alternate space, I would've thought that she didn't even know I was here.

I knew better, though. I figured she was probably waiting for me to say something. So when I finally came close enough to talk to her, I was sure to call her name. "Haruhi!"

When I called to her, she made no attempt to respond. Instead, I noticed that the rain had begun to die down suddenly. Within seconds, a downpour had transformed into a moderate drizzle. Whether she did this because she was glad I was there or so that she could hear me better, I wasn't sure yet.

"Haruhi…" I called again hoping for a response. Again there was none.

With the rain calming down, I could see her in front of me a bit more clearly. I saw small droplets drip from her hair as the excess water moved its way downward. I saw her hand gripping onto the railing tightly, displaying a great deal of tension. I could also tell that her breathing was rather heavy. In other words, she wasn't happy… not one bit…

Well, here goes nothing. "I… I heard that you found out."

"Is that so?" snapped Haruhi with a hint of venom. Well, at least she's talking to me.

I swallowed hard before I continued, making a mental note of my own rising fear. "Look, I can understand that you would be upset that…"

I was cut off before I could finish my sentence. "Upset? Really. Is that what you think I'm feeling? Why does it matter to you how I feel? You'll be gone tomorrow, right? Don't you worry about me. Just go ahead and leave like you were planning to do."

You can't fool me into thinking that is what you want. The fact that you're on the verge of ripping apart the fabric of reality is a pretty big clue that it's the last thing you want me to do.

I took another deep breath, feeling my mouth becoming extremely dry. "Listen, the reason…" I coughed a bit due to the dryness in my throat. "The reason why I didn't tell you about the fact that I was moving was because I didn't want to ruin the trip since it seemed so important to you."

The next word out of Haruhi's mouth was barely audible. "Liar…"

"No, I'm telling the truth. It's not like I want to leave, but your father didn't give me a choice."

I then noticed her grip on the railing tightening even further, causing her nails to dig into the wood. Her entire body was tensing up to the point where it was practically shaking. I knew immediately that she was about to lose control of her anger and took a step back.

She then turned around and exploded in a torrent of rage and fury. "LIIIIIIIAAAAAAARRRRRR!!!!"

It was at that very moment that all hell broke loose. It started with a mild rumbling off in the distance, but before long the noise became so loud that it was almost deafening. I watched in the distance as the ground within the city began to crack and break open. The cracks spider-webbed their way along the countryside, literally ripping the land apart. Several large buildings suddenly exploded violently and fell into the cracks below. The clouds, which had ceased raining, had darkened and begun to swirl ominously above in a faster and faster revolution. Large arcs of blue colored lightning began to shoot out from different spots in the clouds. And during all of this, Haruhi just stood there with her head down, completely motionless. The bangs of her hair obscured her eyes, leaving me to only guess what expression they gave. No doubt that they displayed a horrible, destructive ire. If I didn't know any better, I would've sworn that Haruhi was trying to tear this world into shreds.

"You don't care about anyone other than yourself!" yelled the girl with god-like powers.

As her words hit me, I then had a terrible revelation. What if instead of sending me back to the old world and destroying it along with me, she decided to destroy this alternate space while I was still trapped here?

Fearing the worst, I put a hand on her shoulder to try and calm her down. "Haruhi! Listen! You need to calm down!"

"DON'T TOUCH ME!" she screamed as she swatted my hand away with one arm and proceed to slam the palm of her other arm right into my chest.

The impact felt like something close to being hit with a sledgehammer. I fell back several feet, feeling the wind knocked out of me. I lay on the floor for several seconds while I attempted to regain my breath. Whether she was capable of hitting me that hard naturally, or if the blow was intensified by her own powers, I couldn't be sure.

I eventually made it onto my hands and knees in time to see a bolt of bluish lightening strike the top of the temple, causing a chunk of it to explode and burst into flames. I then felt another violent rumble and shake around me, as if I'd been caught in an enormous earthquake. Barely managing to not fall back on my face, I then felt like my body had become several times heavier, which was enough to push me back down onto my chest. I couldn't understand why my body was being pressed down until I looked out into the surrounding area.

It was then that I realized that it wasn't my body that was being pushed down, but rather the temple itself was being lifted up into the air.

Perhaps most disturbing of all was the fact that Haruhi was motionless during all of this. It bordered on insanity that she would be unable to notice everything that was happening around us. There only explanation was that she was so engrossed with her anger and bitterness that everything around her had been tuned out.

It wasn't long before the temple had risen into the dark clouds above us. As the dark particles touched my skin, I could feel my skin chill ever so slightly, sending a shiver down my spine. The darkness of the mist around me had completely obscured my vision, making it impossible for me to see anything around me.

I then heard Haruhi's voice once again. "I knew you were hiding something! You were acting weird all week long. I asked you if there was something going on, and you lied right to my face!"

I felt my heart sink as her words penetrated my ears. An enormous amount of guilt and shame built up inside of me as I continued to hear her speak.

"After all this time, I thought I knew you, Kyon! I thought you were the one person I could trust! How could I have been so stupid?!"

By now I had become an emotional wreck. I was quickly losing the will to speak. I slowly got to my feet just as the clouds began to clear up. Soon everything around me cleared up, and I could get a good look at Haruhi once more. It was then that I noticed drops of water falling right near her feet. At first I thought it was more water droplets from her hair, but upon looking closer, I realized that the droplets were rolling down her face and down to her chin.

They were tears… her tears…

"The reason… that I was waiting so long to tell you my feelings…" said Haruhi, her voice cracking a bit, "… was because I was afraid that you didn't feel the same way. I was afraid that you only saw me as a friend, or worse, that you had feelings for someone else."

She then placed her hand onto her face as if to hide her sadness and despair. "But with all that had happened in the last month, I was so sure that there was something there. I worked so hard to plan this whole trip, making sure that everything was perfect. I thought that maybe, just maybe, I could finally be honest and open with you

about how I felt. I prayed so hard in the hope that you felt the same feelings for me as I did for you."

I then watched as she fell to her knees and continued sobbing. Seeing her in this wretched state was an experience I thought I'd never see in my entire life. In fact, if you'd asked me a year ago if I thought she could cry, I probably would have said no. In hindsight, I realized that it wasn't that she couldn't cry. It was the fact that she would always hide it whenever she felt the need to. In the time I spent living with her, I realized that Haruhi's room was the sanctuary to which she could vent her sadness, despair and frustration in a way that allowed nobody to see her vulnerability. Unfortunately, her room was nowhere near here, and there wasn't anywhere for her to go to hide this side of herself. I could only imagine how degrading it must've made her feel to be seen like this. I would be lying if I said I wanted to see her in this state; it tore me apart inside.

Haruhi sniffled some before speaking again. "I know now that I was wasting my time. You don't care about me at all. I was never anything special to you. I almost wish I never met you."

I wanted to say something to her, but the words weren't coming out. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't think of what to say.

"I don't get it," spoke the young goddess. "What is it about me that isn't enough? Am I not pretty enough? Is my chest too small or big? Am I too weird or bossy? Is my hair too short? Did my parents put you off? Are you gay? I just don't understand."

She then looked up at me. I could see her eyes had become extremely red and filled with tears. She took a deep breath before asking me one important question. "WHY CAN'T YOU LOVE ME THE WAY I LOVE YOU?!!"

That of course was the one billion yen question. Why couldn't I love her like she loved me? Of course the question I first had to ask was "Do I love her?" Of course, it was a rhetorical question, right? Do I really have to answer?

Before I could attempt to answer her, Haruhi had stood up and grabbed me by my shirt and pulled me close to her face. "Tell me the truth. I have to know. What am I to you?"

I was caught off guard by the question. I had hoped that I wouldn't have to answer it right at this moment. "I… I… thought you wanted me to tell you when we…"

She cut me off. "Forget what I said before! I want to know now! Tell me! I can't move on until I know the truth!"

The next minute that passed by went by as if time itself had decided to take it slow so that I could get a chance to think. I was really hoping that I wouldn't be put on the spot like this, but seeing as there was nowhere to run and seeing Haruhi pleading with me so desperately, I realized that I could not back away from this anymore. I had to decide once and for all whether or not I did love her. Just the thought of it already triggered that internal fear response that would always appear every time I'd thought about it. Once again, my brain felt like there were a million warning klaxons going off all at once. No time to think about that. I need to tell her the truth, but what was the truth? How could I tell her how I felt if I didn't even know?

Okay, there's an easy way to solve this. I'll just start by telling myself. On the count of three, I'll say how I really feel. After that I just tell her and hope for the best.

Okay. One. Two. Three!

I… I… I… can't do it! Dammit! What's wrong with you?! Okay, how about this? Just tell her that you love her, even if it isn't the truth. We'll start again by saying it to myself and then to her.

Ready? Set. Go!

… Why? Why can't I do it?! A simple three words and I can't even say it to myself. Was there actually something wrong with me? I could try and say that I didn't love her, but for some reason my brain

is fighting me on that too. How can I be so conflicted? I either love her or I don't, right? Which is it?!

I knew by now that the reason for my indecisiveness must've been deep within my subconscious. Unfortunately, I didn't have the luxury of being able to take years of psychoanalytic therapy in order to determine the source of what was causing my never-ending uncertainty. Instead, I was going to have to settle on a crash course on self-psychoanalysis. I would have no choice but to probe deep within my mind and hope I could find something. Sigmund Freud would likely roll in his grave if he knew that someone would be attempting something this crude and have the nerve to call it psychoanalysis.

I began to mull over the various memories I had with Haruhi and the SOS Brigade thinking that the root of the problem was somewhere within those memories. I decided to start with the more unpleasant memories, such as all the times she would boss me around, or that one time at Tsuruya-san's house when she angered me to the point where I almost hit her. I was disappointed to find that none of these memories seemed to trigger the anxiety that I would feel whenever I thought of being close to her. I then tried some other memories, such as the time when she disappeared and the universe was remade by Nagato. Going by one memory at a time, none of them had but maybe a mild level of anxiety triggered. I was becoming incredibly frustrated by the lack of success. Surely none of these events were the reason for why I could not commit myself to an answer.

I then pushed further back to the first couple months of when I met Haruhi, during that turbulent period when we first founded the Brigade and when I was first finding out the truth about her and the other members. I noticed that the anxiety went up a bit. There! I must be getting closer. I then thought about the time when she and I were trapped in the closed space together and when I kissed her. No, that not it. It's further back, even before the Brigade was founded. I felt the apprehension grow further. I must be getting close. I tried thinking about that time when I was first getting to know her. Did she

say something that put me off? I then thought of her introduction to the class when I first met her. No, that's not it, either. As odd as that introduction was, it wasn't the answer I was looking for.

Dammit, I know I'm close. There was an event at this time that had a major impact on how I would feel about her. What was it? Was when I first… I… I could feel it. It was as if the warning klaxons in my head increased tenfold. The day I first talked to her. That image in my head… it must've been the Friday of the first week. She had four ponytails on her head. I remember her rude remarks when I tried talking to her. This is it! That moment's important! But… why? Was I so upset over her rejection that I became unable to get over it? No, there's more to this. I'm sure of it. I need to probe deeper! The real reason was further back in the past… I can feel it!

I let my mind move deeper into my past, to the time before I met Haruhi. As I moved through the years that I was in middle school, I felt the pain in my chest grow. My breathing became shorter and shorter to the point where I was wondering if I was having a panic attack. Why are these memories suddenly so unpleasant? Was there something that my brain was trying to hide? What was it? What is it that makes me so unwilling to get close to Haruhi?!

Just when the negative feelings had just about reached the point where I could no longer withstand them, I then saw an image in my head that I hadn't seen in my years. It was an image that used to bring great joy and feelings of pure serenity. However, now this memory was poisoned beyond any hope of repair. Forever would this be a tainted memory.

That memory was the smiling face of my cousin…

And it hit me like a sledgehammer. All at once, I could literally feel all the synapses within my brain firing away, processing this newfound information. At last it was all clear!

The events that had led to my heartbreak with my cousin had apparently been far more traumatic than I had originally thought.

There's a theory in psychology that states that some people who experience traumatic events would often create defense mechanisms that would be designed to protect that individual from any emotional harm. In my case, my brain would put me into a state of denial whenever there was someone to whom I was interested in that then caused me some level of emotional pain. I would then go out of my way to prevent myself from ever acknowledging that I had ever had feelings for that person.

All throughout Junior High, without even knowing it, I had done this over and over again. Whenever a girl I thought I might have liked rejected me, I would deny to myself that I even felt anything for her. This defense mechanism served me well for many years and did well to protect my psyche; however, one day it would betray me. That day was when I first spoke to Haruhi Suzumiya.

I remember now that the main reason why I wanted to talk to her in the first place was because I found her both attractive and intriguing. When she rejected my first attempt to talk to her, the defense mechanism immediately kicked in, blacklisting her and forever preventing her from being able to hurt me emotionally. This of course had the effect of making it so that whenever I tried to think about my feelings for her, the defense mechanism kicked in, preventing me from being able to be honest with myself.

But a lot had changed since I first met her, and she is not the same person that she was when I first talked to her. So why did the defense mechanism continue to blacklist her? Simple. Defense mechanisms function within the primitive, irrational part of our brains. Even though there was no longer any logical reason to keep my emotional defenses up, it remained there, reacting much like an overactive immune system reacts to an allergen. And as long as I remained unaware that this was happening, I would be powerless to do anything about it.

The moment all of this finally became clear to me, I felt a tremendous amount of relief pass through my entire body. I finally understood why I couldn't admit how I felt about Haruhi, and now

that I was aware of the reason, it became easy to deconstruct the mechanism that had protected me for so many years. Once I did so, I was soon overwhelmed with the intense rush of feelings and emotions that hit me with radiating warmth. I was no longer in denial about my feelings now. I finally realized why I had been so divided. While one part of me had been fighting to protect myself from my feelings, the other had fought to embrace them. With the one side now permanently vanquished, I now knew the truth about how I felt.

I loved Haruhi Suzumiya. I loved her with all my heart…

And to think that I figured all of this out within the space of a minute. Ha, take that Sigmund Freud! Who needs you when I can solve my own psychological problems?!

I looked down at Haruhi, who by now was showing a great deal of doubt. Her eyes were red from all the tears that had been released, and those said tears were still rolling down her eyes. If it wasn't for the fact that she looked so terribly miserable, I would have said that she looked ridiculously adorable.

I gave her the warmest smile I could muster and placed my hands on her shoulders. It was now or never. It was time to tell her how I really feel.

However, before I could say a single word, I heard the sound of cracking wood underneath us. The stage itself was cracking apart. With nothing underneath the wooden beams to support it, the stage could no longer hold itself together, and soon cracks had formed all throughout the frame. Seconds later, the stage broke apart, causing the floor to suddenly tilt forward at a steep incline. The two of us could do nothing but tumble down the incline and over the remains of the railing.

Reacting by pure instinct, I grabbed onto Haruhi's hand while simultaneously grabbing onto the railing with my other hand. It seemed at the moment that I had saved the both of us, except for one major problem. My wrist, which had been hurt when I fell off the

bike earlier, was now throbbing in excruciating pain as it held onto the railing. I screamed in agony as I struggled not to let go.

Haruhi immediately reacted by taking her other arm and grabbing onto my good arm, increasing her grip. I could see that she was deeply fearful of falling and was struggling to hold on.

"Kyon! Are you okay?" she asked, obviously noticing my pain.

"It's my wrist! I don't think I can hold on much longer!" Seriously, my wrist felt like it was being stabbed.

"Hold on! I think I can climb up!" She then attempted to climb up my arm.

Unfortunately, her movements only increased the pain in my wrist further. "Stop! Stop! It hurts!"

Haruhi stopped climbing and her grip slipped back down to my hand. We now hung there helplessly, unable to move. I didn't have the strength to pull her up, and any attempt made by her to climb up my body would likely cause my other hand to lose its grip. This could only mean one thing. We were going to fall.

No! This can't be how it all ends. I was so close to telling her! Dammit! Dammit, this isn't fair! I don't want to die! Not now! Not when I was ready to finally let go…

When the last words of that thought hit me, it was then that the full meaning of Nagato's haiku was finally clear. That was it! I now knew what I had to do!

I looked down at Haruhi, doing my best to ignore the pain I was in as well as my weakening grip. "I'll admit… that I've lied to you about more than just that fact that I was going to move."

Haruhi's expression bordered on absolute bewilderment when she heard that. "What are you talking about?"

"Remember that time on the roof when we asked each other who we'd want to be with if we were stranded on a desert island? Well, the truth is that I wasn't honest either when I said I wanted to be with Tsuruya-san. There's one other person that I'd rather be with, more than anyone else."

Haruhi was baffled as to why I was saying these things. "Why are you saying that? What are you trying to tell me?"

I swallowed hard before I continued. "There was this girl that I'd fallen in love with many years back, long before I knew you. She broke my heart, and ever since then, I've been afraid to open myself up to those that I feared I might have feelings for, especially if I thought they might hurt me. And because of that, when your father told me that I had to leave, rather than standing up to him, I acted like a coward and decided to run away rather than face my feelings. Well, I'm not going anywhere! I don't care if I have to live on the streets! I'm staying where I belong… with you!"

Saying those things had an enormous impact on me emotionally, and as much as I hate to admit it, I could not prevent a tear from welling up and rolling down my cheek. Haruhi was now looking at me with a mix of anticipation and understanding. I think she knew what was about to happen.

" *I love you, Haruhi! And I promise that I'll never run from you again!"*

It was at this point that I realized that there was only one thing left to do. I knew from the height we were at, the fall would surely be fatal. However, with the last of my grip ebbing away, I knew that only one person could save us. I had to put my faith in Haruhi. And even if she were to fail, I knew that I still wanted the last seconds of my life to be the best I'd ever experienced.

I then let go…

I didn't give Haruhi the chance to scream as we began to fall. The first thing I did was pull her close to me and wrap my arms around

her. As we continued to descend, I brought my face as close as I could to hers, staring deeply into her eyes. Despite the fact that her eyes were red and a bit puffy, she never looked more beautiful to me. Those amber orbs were are magical and mesmerizing as the day I first laid eyes on them. Feeling her breath tickle my lips, I closed my eyes and pressed my lips against hers.

The familiar sensations of the last time shot back like lightening, only this time they were stronger than ever. The softness of her lips. The sensuous taste. It was the most amazing sensation I'd ever felt in my entire life. Her arms wrapped themselves around my neck and back, pulling my body even closer. She felt so soft and warm whilst pressed against me, even despite the fact that we were both still wet from the rain. I soon felt like I was floating in air, quite literally. I never bothered to open my eyes to confirm this, as I'd learned that it was rude to open your eyes while kissing.

Moments later, the sensation of falling had returned. Before I had a chance to pull away from the kiss and open my eyes, I felt my legs suddenly hit something. It snapped under the force of my falling body, but it was soon followed by several more of its kind after that. I soon realized that they were branches of a tree, and that the two of us were falling through it.

I did my best to cover up Haruhi as we continued to land on the thin branches. Eventually, one of the branches hit my side and didn't snap. Instead, I bounced off of it hard. As my body began to spin the other way, my head then hit another rather thick branch… hard… I blacked out momentarily, and it was only when I landed in the soft, wet and muddy ground that I regained some of my senses. Somehow through all of it, I managed to protect Haruhi from most of the hazards, and when she got up, the most I could see on her was a large scratch across her right cheek. I, on the other hand, was on really bad shape.

Haruhi looked down at me to see if I was okay. "Kyon! Kyon, are you okay?!"

I struggled to raise a hand. "I think so. Maybe."

Looking somewhat relieved, Haruhi then looked up from where we had fallen. I too looked up to see what had happened. I was startled to find the stage as well as the rest of the Kiyomizu-dera staring right at us as if it had never moved at all. Not only that, but the sky was blue again, with only a trace of a few clouds. We were back in the real world.

"I can't believe it," said Haruhi before turning toward me with that infamous million-watt smile of hers. "Can you believe it?! We just jumped the stage at the Kiyomizu-dera!"

It was more like we fell from the stage really, and I hardly think that it's something to be proud of. I then began to struggle to get up, but it wasn't long before I felt an incredibly intense stabbing pain in my side. I was also having trouble breathing.

Haruhi was quick to notice something wrong, and her smile soon transformed into deep concern. "Kyon, what's wrong? Are you going to be okay?"

The moment she said that, I noticed that the world around me was starting to spin, and my head was in terrible pain. "No… something's wrong…" Just as I spoke those words, I felt my consciousness begin to slip.

The last thing I saw and heard was Haruhi leaping to her feet and screaming for help…

And so Kyon has finally admitted his true feelings! But what will happen to him now? Are his injuries serious? What will this mean for him and Haruhi? There are only two more chapters left, and if you want to see them… then you'll have to wait until I write them…

I also wanted to asked the reader here for another favor (I know, I'm really selfish). You see, I've desperately wanted to see fan art of my OCs, but I've been reluctant to ask since I thought it might have been a bad idea. After discussing it with some people who frequent this site, I've decided it was okay to ask. I'm looking for talented artists to draw Oruki and Naru fan art. I may even be able to discuss payment if you so desire. My e-mail is if you're interested.

Thank you very much, and I hope this chapter pushes this fic to the 1000 mark! W00t!

Chapter 29

We did it! 1000+ reviews! Thank you all SSSSOOOOOO much for all of your support! It's incredibly rare for any fic to gain so many reviews, especially for a show as popular as Haruhi. It's an honor having fans and readers as awesome as you guys. I don't know if I would have ever gotten this far without you.

Anyway, after having next to no screen time in the last four chapters, Oruki and Naru return again in this chapter. How will they react to the events that transpired in Kyoto? What has become of Kyon's injuries? Will Kyon and Haruhi be together happily ever after? We shall see…

Oh, and one more thing. As for the whole "LIAR" scene, that wasn't meant to be a reference… I've actually never seen Higurashi. :(Chalk it all up to coincidence…

Well, I truly hope you enjoy this chapter…

Chapter 29

Concussions are a relatively common injury. The cause can be a lot of things, from a simple fall to a car accident. However, they all have one thing in common. A concussion is a brain injury caused by a blow to the head. Shortly afterwards, the brain swells a bit. This swelling is where most of the damage comes from. The symptoms of a concussion range from mild (such as a nasty headache) to relatively severe (such as short-term memory loss).

Unfortunately for me, the concussion I received was relatively severe. Severe enough that it caused me to forget much of what happened minutes before I hit my head. In fact, the last thing I remembered was reaching the temple in my desperate hope to prevent Haruhi from recreating the world and wiping me from

existence. When I first awoke, I found myself in the hospital, lying in bed while the lights in the room were off. I felt a bandage around my head and my side, as well as a brace around my wrist. When I turned my head a bit, I noticed that Haruhi was laying her head next to my bed, fast asleep. My head was killing me, and I felt a sharp pain stabbing my side every time I took a breath. In other words, I felt like a wreck. What the hell happened? And why couldn't I remember a thing?

I passed back out shortly after that to get some more rest. By the time I woke up again, the lights were back on, and I realized that I wasn't the only one awake in my room. I noticed that the whole Brigade was sitting nearby, waiting for me to recover. When they noticed me waking up, I could see the obvious relief on their faces.

Asahina-san was the first to say something. "Kyon-kun!"

"Hey," I said gently as I looked at each of their faces. Asahina-san appeared to nearly be in tears, while Nagato appeared unfazed, although I could see a small trace of relief on her face as well. Koizumi still had his ever annoying expression, and last of all, Haruhi's face showed a great deal of both joy and repose, as if all the great burdens she had felt in the last week were finally lifted. I also noticed a bandage on her face. Did she get hurt, too?

I tried to sit up, but I was soon reminded of the nasty pain in my side again and had to give up.

"Careful," said Koizumi. "You've still got some recovering to do."

"What happened?" I asked, my brain still completely muddled over what had happened.

I noticed Koizumi, Nagato and Asahina-san looking at one another, as if trying to figure out what to say. Haruhi, on the other hand, appeared confused by my statement. "You don't remember?"

I placed my good hand on my head and rubbed it lightly. "Not really. The last thing I remember was…" I thought hard about what I could remember last. "… running into that temple to talk to you."

Haruhi began to slowly frown when she heard this. "Are you sure?"

I tried my hardest to think about it. For some reason, I could feel that something big had happened. I was sure of it. Yet, I couldn't put a finger on it. "Nothing. What happened?"

Haruhi's eyes began to slowly move towards the floor as she sighed deeply in what appeared to be disappointment. "N… nothing. Don't worry about it."

"I believe it's best if I explain," said Koizumi. "Yesterday, while we were looking for Suzumiya-san, the city of Kyoto was hit with a massive storm."

Wait, I remember the storm from when I was trying to ride to the Kiyomizu-dera. Did that really happen in the real world, too?

"Shortly after that," said Koizumi, "there was a large earthquake that shook the city." He then leaned forward a bit before explaining the last part. "Apparently, you and Suzumiya-san were standing near the edge of the stage at the Kiyomizu-dera during the earthquake and were thrown off the side of it as a result."

Whoa! You mean that Haruhi and I… fell of the edge of that thing? No wonder why I was hurt so bad. And yet for some reason, the earthquake reminded me of something. Did something like an earthquake occur in that alternate space as well? Dammit, I wish I could remember.

It was then that Haruhi decided to stand up. "Well, we should all be glad that you're okay." She then began to walk towards the door. "I'm going to go out and grab you something to drink." A second later, she was out the door. I got the feeling for some reason that she was looking for an excuse to leave the room.

I turned to Koizumi when she was gone. "So what really happened?"

"More or less what I told you is the truth, at least from our perspective. Unfortunately, none of us were there inside the alternate space after we were all removed. I was hoping you could fill us in on what had happened, but it appears that head injury of yours has affected your memory."

I groaned a bit as I rubbed the bridge of my nose. "You said this all happened yesterday, right? How long have I been out?"

Nagato decided to answer this question. "Approximately twenty-three hours, fourteen minutes and forty-two seconds have passed since you and Suzumiya-san were both recovered by medical personnel."

Leave it to Nagato to be so precise. I then had another question that bothered me. "Does Haruhi know anything about what happened?"

"Not from what we can tell," answered Koizumi. "She appears to still be ignorant about what really went on. To her, nothing out of the ordinary occurred."

That's good. That only leaves me with one more question. "So what exactly is wrong with me?"

"You have suffered an injury to your cranium as a result of a concussive blow followed by some level of swelling," said the human interface. "Also, one of the lower ribs on the right side of your abdomen has received a minor fracture, and the ligaments in your wrist have suffered a small tear."

"In other words," interrupted Koizumi, "you received a concussion, a fractured rib and a sprained wrist. Fortunately, none of these injuries are too serious, but you won't be moving around much for a little while."

Great. Why was it that every time something bad happened, I was the one who had to be hurt? I knew enough about concussions to know that it was likely the reason my memory was so clouded. And the fractured rib made it really painful for me to breathe. I was only too glad that the brace kept me from moving my wrist. I was sure it still hurt really badly, too.

I then had an idea. If there was anyone that could help me with my condition, it was Nagato. "Hey, Nagato. I have a favor to ask."

"What?" asked Nagato, her head tilting ever so slightly.

"Do you think it's possible that you could fix me up… including my memory?"

Nagato paused for a slight moment before answering. "Damage to neural pathways as a result of injury to the cranial area is common, and in many cases, the neural pathways themselves are able to repair themselves if given enough time. However, while it is possible to reconnect these pathways manually, this action carries some risk."

"What's that?" I asked, growing somewhat worried.

"Reconnecting incorrect pathways can create misleading or ever false memories. Unless I was to be sure of which pathways to properly connect, the probability of connecting incorrect pathways is unacceptably high."

That's not good, is it? "So does that mean you can't do it?"

"It can be done, but I would need to analyze the circuitry of your brain before doing so. Doing as such would take some time."

Well, as long as it worked. "Go ahead and give it a try."

It was then that Nagato placed a hand onto my forehead and closed her eyes. Her mouth moved rapidly as she stood there, apparently analyzing my brain. To be honest, if this had been anyone else other

than Nagato, I'd probably be totally against the idea of them going through my brain like this. There was a lot of stuff in there that I'd preferred to keep private. However, I knew I could trust Nagato, so I simply relaxed while she did her work.

After about a minute, I noticed Nagato's eyes open up. They appeared to be open slightly larger than usual, which worried me. It didn't seem like a good sign. "Is everything alright?"

Nagato looked directly at me before responding. "It is fine. Neural scan is eighty-seven percent complete."

"Oh," I responded in relief. "Good. You had me worried there. You didn't see anything too disturbing, did you?"

Nagato didn't respond, which only reinforced my previous nervousness. There wasn't anything too bad in there, right? Maybe it was a bad idea to let Nagato do this.

Before I could say or think anything else, I spotted Nagato turning her head towards the door. When I went and looked at what she was looking at, I spotted Haruhi staring at the two of us strangely while holding onto a can of apple juice.

"Yuki-chan… what are you doing?"

There was a deafening silence for half a second before I responded. "Nagato was just checking my head to see if it was alright."

Having hearing that, Haruhi blinked for a bit before sighing deeply. "Yuki-chan, I know you're worried, but you should leave his care to the professionals. He's fine. He's not going to die." She then went up and handed me the can of juice after opening it.

After I had a sip of it, Haruhi went to the front of the room to make an announcement. "I want to thank everyone for coming here to check on the two of us. As you can tell, we both were hurt a bit after the accident, but we're going to be okay. The doctors told me that they

want Kyon to stay for a few more days for observation before they decide to release him. And while I know all of you will want to stay with him during that time, you all have school to think about. It would unacceptable if the rest of my Brigade members began to fail school due to the misfortune of Brigade Chief and one of our Brigade members."

"What will you do, Suzumiya-san?" asked Asahina-san.

"Since the well-being of all my Brigade members is my responsibility, I will stay behind and see to it that he's taken care of. My parents are on their way here to pick the both of us up when he's been released. Do you guys have any way of getting back?"

"I'm afraid that leaving by train is impossible thanks to the earthquake," answered Koizumi. "However, I was able to arrange transportation back home thanks to some help from a relative."

"Good," said Haruhi while nodding. "Then we'll see each other when we get back. None of you will be required to meet at the clubroom while I'm gone. Consider it a break after all that's happened while we were out here."

After that, everyone said their good-byes as Nagato, Koizumi and Asahina-san made their way out the door and left.

With them gone, the room suddenly became very quiet. Haruhi went and spent most of her time staring out the window. I could tell that she was feeling down, and when I pondered as to why that was, I was hit with the realization that I was supposed to have left to go live with my parents up north by now.

"My parents," I said, wondering if they were worried about me.

"Don't worry," said Haruhi, her eyes still looking out the window. "I already called your mother and told her what happened."

"Oh, you did? Thanks…" I then laid back into my bed some more, feeling a little relieved. However, I began to worry about whether I ever got to apologize to Haruhi about me moving away. I turned towards her once more. "Hey, I don't know if I said this to you already, but I'm really sorry about not telling you about me moving away. I'm… I'm just glad we got a few more days together before I have to go."

When she heard those words, I saw her face contort a bit, as if I'd said something really nasty. She then closed her eyes and gnashed her teeth. "You… you told me that…" The rest of what she said was too low for me to hear.

"What?"

"Forget it!" yelled Haruhi loudly before she got up and walked out of the room. I wanted to yell out and stop her, but I wasn't sure of what to say. Did I say something wrong? What did she mean when she said that I said something? Dammit, why couldn't I remember? It felt like it was so close, and yet it remained out of reach. I could only hope that Haruhi wasn't upset enough to do something drastic to the universe… again…

I was left alone in my room for what seemed like forever. In that time, I began to think about the last month, which seemed to have flown by at a speed that would make a certain hedgehog envious. Between having to deal with living with Haruhi and her equally insane parents, dealing with the mess that ensued when said parents discovered the truth about the SOS Brigade, working on that crazy mud-wrestling tournament, dealing with everything that happened before and during this trip to Kyoto and everything in between, it was without a doubt one of the most stressful months of my life.

And yet, it was also one of the best months of my life. Whether I wanted to admit it or not, I felt at home at the Suzumiya's place. In the short time that I spent there, I'd grown used to everyone's quirks and felt myself growing fonder and fonder of everyone there with

every passing day. Sure, there were a few rough patches, and there were definitely times when I wasn't sure if I could handle living there, but in the end, I found that Haruhi and her parents had become almost an extension of my own family. It was really too bad that I couldn't stay there longer.

It was then that I began to hear some familiar voices near the door to my room. "Haru-chan! My baby!! What happened to you?!!"

"M-mom. I'm fine. Don't worry about me."

"Oh, I'm so sorry! You're not hurt are you?!"

"Let go of her, Naru-chan! She said she was fine!"

I found myself feeling a bit relieved to hear their voices. Hopefully it wouldn't be too long before I could leave this place.

"You wouldn't believe the hassle we had to go though to get into the city," said a voice obviously belonging to Oruki. "Half the roads are closed thanks to the earthquake. I'm surprised things weren't worse here."

"It wasn't that big an earthquake, dad."

"So… where is he?" asked Naru-san.

"He's in there resting. I… decided to step out to leave him alone."

It was then that Naru-san entered the room, followed by her husband and daughter. Upon seeing me, Naru-san's eyes widened, and her skin became a few shades paler. "Oh my god…" She immediately ran up to me, grabbed my shirt, and began to shake me violently. "Kyon-kun! Please tell me you're okay! You have to be okay! Please don't die on me, Kyon-kun!"

Her reckless shaking of my body was very painful. "Ow! Naru-san, please stop. That hurts."

Naru-san let go of me and seemed on the verge of tears. "Oh, this is all my fault! How could I let this happen to you?!"

"Calm down, mom," said Haruhi. "You're overreacting."

After hearing her daughter's words, Naru-san took a deep breath and sighed deeply. "Okay…"

After about a minute, Haruhi and her mother excused themselves for a bit and left the room, leaving me alone with Oruki. "So… what happened yesterday?"

I took as deep of a breath as I could muster (given the condition of my ribs) and told him every that I knew. "Not much. Haruhi basically flipped out when she heard the truth and nearly destroyed the universe."

"Is that all?" asked Oruki, his face showing obvious signs of disturbed feelings. "What the hell did you do to stop it?"

"I have no idea," I said. "The only thing I remember was how myself and the other Brigade members had to enter this alternate universe that Haruhi had created and transported herself into and then…"

"Stop," interrupted Oruki has he began to rub his forehead. "Just stop. Forget I asked. All I want to know is how the two of you ended up falling off the stage at that temple."

I shrugged, wincing a bit when my ribs complained. "Don't remember."

Oruki sighed deeply in what appeared to be defeat. He then straightened up and crossed his arms. "Well I'm just glad that you were the one that took all the damage rather than my daughter."

Oh gee, thanks. Nice to know that you care so much about my condition. I'm fine by the way, just in case you were wondering.

"Quit your complaining," said Oruki sharply. "Think about it. You fell from the goddamned stage at the Kiyomizu-dera, and your injuries aren't even life threatening. Do you have any idea how much of a miracle that is?"

What? Are you jealous? If it bothers you so much, why don't you jump off yourself? Heck, if you give me a few days to recover, I might be able to give you a push.

"Just forget it," said the middle-aged man. "All that matters is that we get you out of here as soon as possible."

Despite Oruki's wishes, the doctor confirmed that it would be a couple days before they were comfortable with releasing me. During that time, the three of them made it a point to hang out at the hospital while I rested. The nurse was kind enough to put me on morphine, which put me to sleep a lot. Whenever I was coherent enough to know what was going on, I'd noticed that Oruki and Naru-san would watch me in shifts, switching back and forth. Oruki would usually just sit there and watch baseball on TV while Naru-san would read a book or converse with me about some silly ideas she had in her head.

Haruhi, on the other hand, stayed by my side the whole time. She tried her best to appear upbeat during our time there, but I could tell that she was merely putting up a front. No doubt that she desperately wished that I didn't have to leave. Thinking about it made me feel terrible every time I did. I found that sleeping helped get my mind off of it, so I usually didn't hesitate to close my eyes every time I felt the need to. Before I knew it, two days had passed, and the four of us were finally able to leave.

The ride home was quiet and uneventful. Even if I had wanted to, I couldn't think to talk about anything during the entire trip back. Several times I looked at Haruhi during the ride back. The whole time, she stared out the window, watching the trees pass by. It was an incredibly depressing sight.

When we finally got back, I was tasked with rescheduling my train ride. To my surprise, I found that I was able to reschedule my train ride for Saturday. That meant that I would be able to rest in my room for two more days while I recovered. The time I spent Thursday and Friday was quiet, possibly too quiet. Only occasionally would either Haruhi or Naru-san come and check on me. Most of the time was spent just resting or reading one of my manga, hoping it would divert my attention from my pain and sadness.

On Friday evening, Tsuruya and the rest of the Brigade came over to check on me. We decided to throw a mini-party, much like the one we had the last time everyone thought I was leaving. It was different this time, though. It lacked the energy of the last time, partly because it was rather spur of the moment and didn't have any thing special to go with it. We just some cake and had some drinks. It made the fact that I was leaving all the more painful.

So then the fateful day of my departure had finally arrived, I was reluctant to get out of bed. However, when I noticed that I only had an hour before I had to leave, I forced myself out of what had been my bed for the last five weeks, got dressed and ready, and slowly made my way downstairs.

I found Oruki sitting at the kitchen table reading and Naru-san cooking when I arrived.

"I thought I'd make you one last really nice breakfast before you finally left," said Naru-san sweetly.

"Thank you," I said weakly. Man I was going to miss her cooking.

"Are you packed?" asked Oruki without taking his eyes off the paper.

"Yeah," I answered, unable to look at him. "Everything I could bring with me is ready to go."

"Don't worry. We'll be sure to ship the rest to you when you get there."

"I appreciate it," I said as I rested my head on my hand. Although I was feeling a bit better physically, I was still in some pain. During the whole time these last few days, I was unable to gain any aid from Nagato without it drawing suspicion form Haruhi. I guess I'll have to heal the old fashioned way.

"Are you sure you're fit to travel?" asked Naru-san with some concern. "It seems too soon for you to leave."

"I'll be okay," I said assuredly. "The doctor said that as long as I took it easy, traveling shouldn't be dangerous."

"Are you sure?"

"He said he's fine," said Oruki gruffly. "He's not a baby. Sheesh."

I then noticed that Haruhi wasn't downstairs with the rest of us. "Where's Haruhi?"

The two of them were reluctant to answer, their expressions saying more than enough. No doubt that Haruhi was still in her room, perhaps too upset to even look at me. I could only imagine how she felt at this moment. The guy that she loved so much was now about to leave her life. How could she not feel terrible? I could only hope that her emotional turmoil didn't affect the universe in any dire way.

I ate my breakfast as quickly as possible and made my way by upstairs to grab my bags. When I exited my room, I was startled when I found Haruhi standing there in the hallway waiting for me. Her eyes were somewhat reddened, a clear indicator of her mood earlier.

"Hey," I said, unsure of what to say.

"Hey," she responded, looking equally unsure. "So… I guess this is it."

"Yeah…" was all I could think to say.

There was an awkward silence between us for about a minute before she suddenly lunged at me, wrapped her arms around my neck and buried her face into my shoulder. I was taken aback by this at first, but after a moment, I responded by hugging her back. Before long, I felt some warmth on my shoulder where her head was, and I realized that she had begun to shed some tears.

"I… I'm really going to miss you," she said, doing her best to not completely break out crying.

"Me too," I said, feeling a bit choked up myself. "I wish this didn't have to happen."

After another minute, Haruhi let go and pulled back. "No… it's fine. You should be back with your family." She then wiped her eyes and cleared her throat before straightening herself out. She then tried her best to look strong and to keep her voice from cracking as she spoke. "As Brigade Chief, I order you to visit during summer break."

"Sounds good," I said with the warmest smile I could muster. We stared at each other for a bit longer before a heard someone clearing his voice behind us.

"It's time to go," said Oruki calmly as he took my bags for me.

With that, we headed downstairs and towards the door. Before I went out the door, I gave Naru-san a quick hug and bid her farewell. A minute later, my bags were in the car and the two of us were about to go. Just before I entered the car, I heard one last word from Haruhi.

"Bye…"

That word… it was said exactly the same way it was spoken more than a month ago the last time she thought I was going to leave. Again, it sounded as if she expected to never see me again. As I turned to look at her one last time, all I saw was her running back

into the house. Damn you, Haruhi. Did you really have to say it like that? Could this moment really be any sadder?

I took one last semi-deep breath before I entered the car with Oruki. Before long, the car was started up and began to move out of the driveway. I took one last look at the house before the car took off, expecting not to see it again for quite some time.

"Don't be so depressed," said Oruki as we got off the street that he lived on. "Look, I'm sure my wife has already told you that you're free to visit whenever you're able to stop by. Summer vacation's only about a couple months away. You'll be back in no time."

Despite his words of encouragement, my mood didn't improve. For some reason, I really didn't want to leave Haruhi's side. Why? What's this feeling inside that tearing at me right now? I feel like I'm forgetting something incredibly important. Why can't I remember?

There was nothing said between us for the rest of the ride, and before long, we'd arrived at the train station.

"We're here," he said as he parked the car. "You ready?"

"I guess," I said as I slowly got out of the vehicle.

I guess this would be my last day here. Farewell, Haruhi. May it not be forever…

Well, this was a really sad chapter to write. To think that it would finally end this way. We're almost there, though. Is Kyon really going to leave? Will Kyon regain his memories? Will he ever see Haruhi again? We shall find out in the concluding chapter.

And I want to thank all of the people who volunteered their time to draw some Oruki and Naru fan art! I truly appreciate your efforts, and I'm proud to have you as fans. I truly hope you guys enjoy the end of this fic!

See you all next chapter!

Chapter 30

First off, I'd like to apologize for the delay of the publishing of this chapter. The truth of the matter is that my laptop (the one that I used to write all my previous chapters) was hit with a really nasty virus that completely disabled it. As a result, I lost a bunch of what I wrote for this chapter and had to start over. This did not sit well with me when it happened, especially since it made it so that I could do nothing when it came to writing for more than two weeks.

But then my father came to my rescue and bought me a new computer as a gift for graduating college. I've been very happy to receive the gift (it's an awesome computer), but by the time I did receive it, I found it difficult to actually begin to write again. It was only now that I finally kicked myself in the ass hard enough to go and finally finish this chapter.

On another note, I forgot to mention last chapter that the whole Kyon having a crush on his cousin thing is actually canon. Kyon mentions her a total of three times in novels 1, 4 and 8. I didn't make that part up, although I did make up the details of the event since Kyon only mentions her in passing.

In any case, I think we can all agree that this chapter is long overdue. It's time to finish this fic.

I hope all of you enjoy it.

Chapter 30

To say that I am a perfect individual would without a doubt be complete nonsense. I've done plenty of things in my life to which I am not proud of. I not sure if I'm really convinced about the idea of karma, but if it does exist, perhaps what was happening at this

moment was pay back for the sins of my past, whether that be my current life, or any past lives I may have had. There was one thing I did know, though. I didn't want to leave, and for some reason I knew that my reason for not wanting to was far more than just missing my friends or home.

The walk into the train station was a surreal moment. I was even tempted to pinch myself, but resisted doing so to avoid looking strange. Oruki didn't bother to follow me into the train station, which was actually preferable. It would've been awkward if he had been standing next to me while I waited for my train.

Having entered the train station with my bag slung over my shoulder, I quickly noticed that the station was fairly crowded. Despite this, I couldn't help but feel especially lonely. I knew that in less than a day that I'd returning to my family and living in an unfamiliar part of Japan. It was hard to believe that my life here was over. To be honest, I think I would've been happier to be Prometheus while getting my liver eaten by that vulture.

It was as I approached the area where my train was waiting for me that I was given a surprise. Standing there together were the three remaining members of the Brigade, Nagato, Asahina-san and Koizumi. I was pleased to see their faces, and I was certain that all three of them were less then happy to see me leave.

"I guess this is it," said Koizumi, his annoying grin still present on his face. "I must say that I sincerely wish that things didn't have to end this way so soon.

I bet you do, Koizumi. I bet you do.

Asahina-san walked up to me nervously, looking as if she was unable to come up with what to say. "I… I just wanted to let you know that… that I'm glad I was given the chance to meet you. I don't think I could have been able to make it without your help."

I smiled warmly at her before patting her on her head. Oh Asahina-san, did you have to look so incredibly cute as you said good bye. You're only making this harder on me. "You'll be fine, Asahina-san. You're stronger than you think."

She gave me the most cheerful expression she could and nodded lightly. I could tell that she was reluctant to say or do something, but I was unable to figure out what it was.

I turned to Nagato next. Her expression appeared as stoic as ever, but I was able to pick up a subtle amount of sadness on her face. Of the three of them, I figured that she was probably going to miss me the most, and to be honest, I was probably going to miss her nearly as much. I mean, I was probably the only person that ever tried to relate to her, and the fact that she tried to alter the universe in thanks for that was proof of her appreciation. What can I say? She's a pretty generous person. Before I could say anything to her, she lifted her arm and showed me a piece of folded up paper. I blinked for a second before taking it from her.

Just before I could unfold the paper and begin reading it, I saw her lift her hand up. "Wait. Please read it later."

After staring at her and the piece of paper for a few seconds, I decided to comply. Perhaps she was feeling a bit shy about what was written on it. I couldn't help but admire how much she's changed since I first met her. Still, she was never one to be very good with words. I decided to read the note when I entered the train.

I looked at each one once more. "You sure you guys are going to be alright without me?"

"I'll admit that things will be most difficult without your assistance," said Koizumi. "However, with any hope, Suzumiya-san's emotional state will stabilize with a little more time.

I turned Asahina-san, despite already knowing the answer to my next question. "Mind telling us what's in store for us in the future?"

She smiled politely, looking somewhat apologetic. "Sorry… classified information."

"Come on. Just this once. You can't break the rule even once?"

"I'm so sorry, but I can't. Don't worry, I sure things will be okay."

I had difficulty figuring out whether her cheerfulness was sincere or faked. Perhaps she knew something I didn't. After all, if something bad did happen, she might not even exist.

It was then that there was an awkward silence between the four of us. I think we all wanted to say more, yet knew that there wasn't really anything else left to say. After about a minute of this, I smiled again, picked my bag and gave a quick wave.

"I'll see you guys during summer vacation, okay?"

The three of them responded by nodding as they waved back. I then turned around and began to make my way towards the train. After showing the staff my ticket, I entered the train and took my seat. I laid back as far as I could (which wasn't very far) and took the deepest breath I could. I looked around the train at the other people around me. Most of them appeared excited and happy about their trip. I was likely one of the few people on the train that was miserable having to leave. It made me feel all the more lonelier.

It was then that I remembered the note that Nagato handed me outside. I quickly pulled it from my pocket, unfolded it, and began reading:

Open your briefcase.

I was left a bit dumbfounded by the message. I had been expecting something more heartwarming and emotional. I certainly didn't expect such a strange command such as this. Following the orders of the piece of paper, I went and opened my briefcase in the hopes that I would discover why I'd been told to do so. To my surprise, I

immediately discovered something that I was sure I didn't pack into the briefcase. It was a book. Not just any book, but the very same book of haikus that I'd received during that party over a month ago. Did Nagato sneak this into my bag while I was talking with the others? It didn't matter. I knew immediately what to do next.

I opened to book and began scanning through it in the hope of finding something unusual. It didn't take long before I discovered another note inside of it. This note was in the shape of a large bookmark with the following message:

I apologize for not being more direct with you, but this was the best way I knew I could speak with you privately under the current situation. While I have been unable to find the opportunity to undo the effects of your memory loss, I was able to discover a method that should allow you to regain those memories on your own. All you need to do is read this passage in the book once more.

P.S. There is more we must discuss in the future, but it will have to wait until the appropriate time.

Was this for real? Did Nagato really find a way to get my memories back without the need for her powers? And when she said we had more to discuss in the future, how far in the future did she mean? And what did she want to discuss? Never mind that. I need to read that passage again. Where was it… there!

When confronting her.

He held on the stage's edge.

He then let it go.

I've read this passage so many times that it should be burned deeply into my psyche. I waited a few moments to let the words sink in, but I didn't remember anything. What the hell?! Was Nagato wrong? I read it again, hoping it would help, but it failed to do any good. Why was this not working? Was there some kind of hidden meaning to the

passage that I was not getting? For some reason, I couldn't help but feel like there was something familiar to it.

Wait, I need to think about what the message means. If I remember correctly, the message wasn't metaphorical but literal. And "the stage" in the message was the stage at the Kiyomizu-dera. I'm sure of that much. And "her" must be Haruhi. And when it says that I held onto the stage's edge…

It was then that felt the synapse in my brain reconnecting as if they had found a long lost relative. The moment that happened, an image in my brain popped up of me hanging from the edge of the stage. I then remembered Haruhi holding onto my other arm. Yes… YES!! It's coming back!! Everything!! I remember. I REMEMBER!! The next memory that hit my brain was of the two of us falling through the air and…

Oh my god… I love her… I LOVE HARUHI SUZUMIYA! WHAT THE HELL AM I DOING?!

I immediately began to look around in my seat. The train hadn't left yet. Good! I needed to get out of here! Now! I grabbed my bag and immediately bolted for the exit of the train. Just as I got there, I noticed that the doors were about to close. By a miracle, I managed to slip by the door before either my bag or myself were trapped inside. Without thinking, I shot for the exit of the train station as fast as my legs could possible carry me.

Minutes later, I literally burst from the door and out onto the sidewalk. It was when I got there that a nasty realization hit me. How in the hell was I going to get back? My ride there was long gone and I didn't have any money for a taxi. Beginning to feel a bit panicked, I began to frantically try to think of a solution.

It was then that I heard a sharp whistling sound to my right. I turned towards it to find a surprising and relieving sight. Standing there were the three remaining members of the Brigade, waving at me as

if they were expecting me. Damn it you guys! Always one step ahead of me!

"Need a lift," said Koizumi with his trademark smile. This would probably be one of the few times in history that I'd be happy to see it. He then lifted his hand into the air. Within seconds, a familiar black vehicle drove up next to us containing a familiar driver.

Koizumi opened the door to let me in. "I think you know what you need to do."

"Good luck, Kyon-kun!" cheered Asahina-san.

"You're not coming with?" I asked in confusion.

"I believe it's best if you go alone," responded Koizumi. "Don't worry, we'll catch up later."

I then turned to Nagato and bowed thankfully. "Thank you, Nagato!"

Nagato responded by nodding her head ever so slightly. "Asahina-san shares the responsibility for aiding you."

"It was her that informed us that this would happen and what we needed to do," added Koizumi.

Asahina-san stared at the ground bashfully. "I… I was merely following orders…"

Oh Asahina-san, your cuteness never ceases to amaze me. "Thank you, Asahina-san. Thank you everyone." I then made my way into the vehicle and waved the three of them goodbye. "I'll see you in the clubroom this Monday!"

They all waved as the car pulled away. Before long, I was back on the road, heading the opposite way I came. This time, however, I was sure that I wasn't going anywhere. I didn't care what it took, I wasn't leaving Haruhi again. That was a promise.

As the car eventually made its way onto the street that she lived on, I felt my heart pound out of my chest. I had no idea what I was going to do or say when I got back. My biggest concern was what I was going to do about Oruki. No doubt that seeing me come back was going to do more than annoy him. No, it doesn't matter. Whatever he does when I get back, I was ready for it. I wasn't going to let him push me around. I knew that if I was ever going to gain his respect that I would have to stand up to him. Now was that time.

The moment the car pulled up to the house, I exploded out of the car, forgetting to thank Arakawa-san for the ride. I ran up to the middle of the yard and filled my lungs with air. Using all the strength in my diaphragm, I screamed out her name.

"HARUHI!!"

I stared at the house, looking for any sign of movement. It was then that I saw a window upstairs open up, reveal the woman that I finally realized I loved so much.

"Kyon?"

"Haruhi!"

"Kyon!"

She then bolted away from the window. Within second, she burst out of the door and ran up to me. She appeared completely dumbfounded, as if she wasn't sure if it was really me. "W… what are you doing h…"

I didn't give her the opportunity to finish her question. The moment she got to me, I grabbed her by her shoulders and instantly pressed my lips onto hers. Within moments, she responded by kissing me back with equal fervor. The warm softness of her lips combined with the sweetness of her scent, intoxicating me in a way I knew I'd never want to end. We were embraced this way for a good minute before I finally let go, looking longingly into her gorgeous amber eyes.

"I told you that I'd never run from you again. That's a promise I intend to keep."

Her eyes widened upon hearing those words, and a smile slowly crept onto her face. "You… remember?"

I nodded before stroking her soft hair. "I love you… Haruhi Suzumiya."

I saw her swallow hard and wipe her eyes, obviously fighting back tears. "I love you, too."

We then kissed again, more tenderly this time. After a few more seconds, I released myself from her lips, only to notice something behind her. Standing near the door were both of her parents, looking utterly stupefied.

Naru-san's stare was constant for a good five seconds before her mouth slowly shifted into a grin. Soon after she began to have a giggling fit, followed by her covering her mouth with her hands. She look positively delighted.

Oruki did not respond in the same way. If anything, his response was quite the opposite. His expression slowly contorted into a terrible ire, a vein popping out of his forehead. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Clearly sensing her father's impending wrath, Haruhi turned to me with a look of concern. "Let me handle this."

"No," I responded, giving her a reassuring squeeze on her arm. "This is something I need to take care of myself." I then moved past her and approached my antagonist. "I'm not leaving!"

"Is that so?" asked Oruki as he began to march up to me. "I'm going to have to disagree. The agreement was one month! You've more than overstayed your welcome!"

"I know that," I retorted harshly. "And I could care less! I'll sleep on the streets if I have to! I'm staying here!"

By now, Oruki had marched right up to my face, staring down at me in the same intimidating matter as the last time he did it. "And you expect me to just be okay with that?! I'm supposed to just accept that you want to be with my daughter now?! To hell with that! I should have known I couldn't trust you!"

"Oruki-kun…" said Naru-san weakly. Unfortunately, her words fell on deaf ears.

Oruki then grabbed me by my collar, nearly choking me with his impossible strength. "You have three seconds to get the hell out of here before things get really messy."

"I'm not afraid of you." That of course was a lie. Despite what I thought to myself earlier, I was actually quite terrified, but I knew that I was willing to do whatever it took to ensure that I was by Haruhi's side from now on. I only hoped that he didn't actually kill me this time.

"Dad! Stop it!" yelled Haruhi in the hopes that he'd desist.

We both ignored her cries and stared each other down. After a few more seconds, Oruki's eyes narrowed sharply. "Have it your way." He then turned around and began to drag me towards the car.

"Kyon!" yelled Haruhi, clearly worrying about my safety.

"Don't worry. I'll be fine," I said as reassuringly as I could while being dragged away. Before long, I was practically thrown into the passenger side of the car before Oruki stormed around the car and entered it on the other side. Seconds later, we were once again on the road. I had no idea what he was planning on doing, but I had a pretty good idea on where we were going.

It's funny how only a mere hour ago we were riding in this car on such good terms.

The ride was eerily silent as I made occasional glances at Oruki's face. His was a face of complete and total seriousness, almost as if it completely lacked any emotion. He wasn't really planning anything drastic, was he? He does know that murdering me would likely doom the universe, right? Please tell me that he's actually thinking straight enough to know this. Before long, we were once again in the wooded area that he liked to visit so much. If he was truly planning on ending my life, this was the place to do it. No, I can't think like that. There has to be a more sane and rational reason for why we're here. I mean, between the three of them, I was sure that Oruki had the best head on his shoulders. Even if he is a Suzumiya, he couldn't be THAT crazy… right?

It was then that we arrived at the clearing. The instant the car came to a halt, Oruki unbuckled his seat belt and exited the vehicle. He marched up to the railing and stared out into the forest around him, completely silent. After about a minute, I felt inclined to get out of the car myself. If he was going to kill me, he'd have done it by now.

As I slowly approached him, he turned slightly and pressed his hand to his face. "I… I need you to clear something up with me."

"What's that?" I asked, a bit confused.

"Nearly two weeks ago, I asked you how you felt about my daughter. Remember that?" I found myself unable to give a response before he continued. "You told me then that you only liked her as a friend. I then tell you that since you only felt that way about her, you couldn't stay because I knew you'd break her heart."

"Look, a lot happened since then and…"

I was interrupted as Oruki turned completely around to face me. "Then, on the day that you were finally supposed to leave, all of a

sudden out of nowhere you come back saying that you're apparently in love with her! Can you see where I'm going with this?"

"I do love her," I said, hoping to reassure him.

"Really? So you're telling me that in the two weeks since I asked you how you felt about her, you suddenly and magically fell in love with her. Am I right?"

"It's… complicated…" I answered, rubbing the back of my head nervously.

"Really? Well maybe I can help simplify it a little for you!" He then begins to walk towards me. "The way I see it, there are two other possibilities that are going on! Either you lied to me two weeks about how you felt about her, or you're lying to me now! Which of those is it? Because I'm having a really hard time believing that you changed your mind so damn fast!"

I was silent for nearly a minute before I finally answered. "I… lied to you two weeks ago…"

"So you admit that you once again have lied to me!" yelled Oruki, clearly getting even more worked up.

"I was more like I was lying to myself."

His expression changed to a mix of confusion and frustration upon hearing that. "So what? You're telling me that you're so much of a coward that you can't even tell yourself the truth!"

"It's a long story… I… I had some issues with girls in the past."

"And that's supposed to make me feel better about this situation?" He then moves even closer to me, staring me down intensely. "Do you want to know what I think? I think that maybe you're not good enough for her."

To be honest, hearing those words from him really pissed me off. Who was he to decide who was good enough for Haruhi? I could care less if he was her father. I had every intention to being with her, even if he didn't approve. "I don't care."

He appeared almost surprised by my remark before looking at me smugly. "You don't care. You don't care, huh? Well look at you. Someone thinks he's pretty tough, huh? Mr. 'I fight monsters and aliens and all that other crap' thinks he's tough enough to stand up to me. Let me tell you something. I've met plenty of tough guys in my life. Sure, maybe none of them have had the kinds of experiences you've had, but nearly all of them were the same. The moment they met someone that they couldn't beat, that 'tough guy' attitude disappeared in an instant. Are you going to tell me that you're different?"

I didn't respond directly. All I could think to do was stare his down, my teeth and fists clenched tightly. I noticed the he spotted my reaction to his words. It was also as if he enjoyed seeing me that way.

"Getting mad? Good! I want you mad. I want to know what you're really made of." He turned around and walked away for a bit, putting some distance between the two of us. He then turned around again. "I'll tell you want. I'll make a deal with you." He then raised his fists in front of him in a fighting stance. "Let's you and me fight."

"… What?" was my response upon hearing his words.

"The rules are simple. All you need to do is get one solid blow on me. That's it. Do whatever it takes to do it. If you can do that, I'll let you stay a bit longer and…" He then looked away from me. "… date… my daughter…"

I stared at him completely dumbfounded. Did he just challenge me to a fight? Him… verses me? What chance could I possibly have against him? What kind of caveman challenges the guys who want their daughters to fist fights. In all the sparring sessions I've ever had

with him, never once was I ever able to land a blow. And to make things worse, I was still recovering from a broken rip, a concussion and a sprained wrist.

"Quit your bitching!" yelled the male Suzumiya. "You're going to tell me that those little boo-boos hurt too much for you to prove yourself? If you really love my daughter, then fight me!"

Am I the only one who's able to see the craziness in all of this? So in order to prove my love, I have to punch you. Do I have to illustrate how incredibly stupid that is? You know what? I was wrong. You're every bit as crazy as your wife and daughter. And if want to fight me so damn bad, well it's a fight you're going to get! I don't care if you rip me apart! I will kick your ass, so help me God!

I stared down at my fist and clenched it as tightly as I could. I summoned up all of my anger and hatred and directed it at my opponent. Breathing heavily, I ready myself for a second before charging at him fast as I could, fist raised. I inwardly knew that this all out attack was likely a foolish move on my part, but I didn't care. I refused to let anything get between me and Haruhi, and I would do anything to win this fight.

As I moved closer, I saw his eyes suddenly widen, as if caught off guard by the suddenly ferocity of my attack. Within seconds, I was upon him, and I swung my fist at his face with all of my might. To my amazement, it connected perfectly with his nose, rocking his entire head back. Wait a minute… I did it! I hit him! I can't believe it!

Oruki stumbled back a few steps and winced a bit. After a second, he grinned at me before a small drop of blood rolled down from his nose. "Not bad…"

I blinked a few times before it registered inside my head as to what happened. Wait a minute… He didn't even try to dodge or block it. Did he… he let me hit him, didn't he? That bastard! What the hell? What was he thinking?

After wiping the blood from his face, Oruki sighed deeply before crossing his arms. "I guess you win. A deal's a deal."

I stared at the man a bit longer before finally responding. "Why'd you let me hit you?"

"I just wanted to find out if you had what it took to stand up to me. Anyone who want's to date my daughter is going to have to show me that they're not a coward. I could care less if you could beat up someone twice your size, or anything like that. All that matters to me is that you're man enough here." He said that last line while pounding his fist on his chest. "Besides, I figured after what I did to you a few weeks ago that you'd love the opportunity to hit me back."

Well, if that's the case, can I hit you a few more times? I don't think the tally is even yet.

"Pfft! If you want to hit me again, you'll have to earn it. No more freebees."

"So… this whole thing… was just some test? You weren't actually mad at me?"

"Well, I'm not exactly thrilled about the idea that my daughter is with a guy, and it would have been nice if you had been honest from the start…" He then hit me with a bit of a bombshell. "Not that I needed you to tell me. I knew from the moment I laid eyes on you that you were in love with her."

Wait… what?! You knew? How?

Oruki narrowed his eyes at me and frowned. "Are you kidding me? Everyone knew. Me, my wife, those friends of yours in that club. Everyone except you and my daughter. Moron…"

Once again, I was left admiring that bastard's keen perception. However, I was also left feeling more confused than ever. "If you knew, why did you tell me that I had to leave?"

"I'll explain on the way back," he said as he began to walk back to the car.

As the two of us rode off out of the woods, Oruki began to explain what had happened. "Like I said, I was pretty sure that you had feelings for her already when I asked you two weeks ago, but when you said that you only liked her as a friend, I figured that you were either lying or confused. Either way, I figured that if I told you that you had to leave, it would give you the motivation to finally get your head on straight and admit the truth. I figured that once you finally got to being honest, I'd tell you that it was okay for you to stay after all."

"Wait, you mean you never intended to kick me out?"

"What, did you really think that I wanted you to go? The one guy capable of preventing my daughter from ripping the universe apart? You didn't actually think I wanted that responsibility, did you? Screw that!"

"So why didn't you stop me at the train station and tell me the truth?"

"Well," said Oruki, looking a bit embarrassed. "When nearly two weeks had passed, and I found out that you still hadn't said anything, I started to wonder if I was wrong. I figured that if I really was wrong about you that maybe it was best if you left. I wasn't really sure on what else to do."

So let me get this straight. You thought that by making me think that I had to leave that it would make it so that I'd admit my true feelings? Do you realize what nearly happened because of your idea? By making me and everyone else think that I had to leave, YOU NEARLY CAUSED THE DESTRUCTION OF THE UNIVERSE!

"L… look, I'll admit that it was a bad idea. By now you should know that thinking things through is not my strong point. The point is that it did work, right?"

I placed a hand on my face upon hearing his words. To think that all this time he never intended to actually kick me out. That bastard! I hate him so much! And now that I think about it, I bet Naru-san knew all about this, too. How could she betray me like that? Are the only secrets she can keep are the ones her husbands tells her?

"It all worked out in the end anyway, so we should just move on. Having you around was actually pretty handy, and now that you're mostly healed, I can start putting you to work again." He almost sounded too happy when saying that last line. However, the smile disappeared when he suddenly started looking around nervously. "Tell you what. I'll make it up to you by telling you some things that I wasn't supposed to tell you."

I raised an eyebrow at him. "Like what?"

He waited a few seconds before answering. "The truth is that Naru-chan and I had a couple visitors come by the house while you and your friends were on your trip."

A couple visitors? Who?!

"The first one came by shortly after you guys had left. Some girl with wavy, green hair. Said her name was… Kimidori, I think."

Kimidori-san… another human interface like Nagato. I suspected that she's one of Nagato's superiors as well. "What was she doing there?"

"I guess since my wife and I were now in the loop about the whole 'my daughter is God' thing, her people felt that they needed to explain their side of the story and what they believed about what was going on. To tell you the truth, I didn't understand a word she told me. I mostly just nodded my head until she left. She did warn me about some possible danger in the future, and when she that, I remembered what you told me about that really bad future event. When she finally left, I got nervous and decided it was best to call you guys to find out what was going on."

Oh yeah… I remember now. That phone call he made to Haruhi and I while we were drunk… heh…

"Anyway, the next day, this gorgeous redhead comes to our door, and I'm thinking that maybe she was lost or something. But when I looked at her, I noticed that she looked familiar. That's when she told us who she was."

It was Asahina-san (Big) wasn't it?

"Yeah. It was that time-traveling girl that's in your club, but… bigger… and… wow!" He then notices me staring at him sharply before trying to continue. "Hey, I'm married, not blind. And I'd never cheat on my wife in a million years. I just couldn't help but admire her… uh… anyway, she came over to explain all the stuff regarding her faction or whatever. Again, I wasn't really paying attention."

I bet you weren't…

"After she was finally done telling us everything, she then suddenly went and gave us a piece of paper. Upon opening it, we found out it was a list of instructions that we had to follow… or more specifically, Naru-chan had to follow." He then looked at me for a second to see the expression on my face as I heard this. "The instructions said that my wife was to call our daughter at a specific time and say what was on the paper. In other words, my wife was ordered to tell our daughter about you moving away."

You've got to be kidding me. Once again, I find myself incredibly miffed over the rather deceitful methods of Asahina-san's future self. Behind my back, she once again pulled the strings, making sure history happens exactly as it's supposed to happen. I know that it's probably necessary for her to do such things for the sake of preserving her time period, but to operate with such deception. She warns me of some impending doom, and then goes and sees to it that it actually happens. How could I not be upset? I'm am once again reminded that I can never trust her.

"So… that's about everything. My wife's been upset that she couldn't tell you, but I insisted that she absolutely had to keep quiet about it."

"So why did you tell me?"

"Frankly, I'm sick and tired of feeling like I have to play by their rules. You know, it was kinda nice when I still thought I had control over my life. Now that I know of all this stuff happening around me, I… I just wanted a chance to tell them to go screw themselves." He then looks at me bit nervously. "You don't think that by telling you this stuff that I'm in any danger, right? I mean, they're not going to scramble my brains or make me disappear, are they?"

I did what I could to relieve his fears. "Truthfully, I highly doubt it. The truth of the matter is that you're the father of Haruhi Suzumiya. As a result, there's only so much that they can do to you. If anything, I'd say your position give you a relatively large amount of wiggle room when it comes to dealing with their rules, just as long as you don't go too far."

Oruki appeared relieved upon hearing what I had to say. "Good. You know, I never thought of it that way. They can't really touch me, can they?"

"For the most part," I said, neglecting to mention the fact that if they wanted, the human interfaces could probably erase his or Naru-san's memories instantly.

"You think they'll know that I said anything to you?"

"Knowing them, they probably already knew you'd tell me."

Oruki took a deep breath. "Ah, screw them. I'm not afraid of them. What's the worst they can do?"

It was after that that the conversation died down, and I was left with the sudden realization that I was on my way back to Haruhi place… no… I was on my way home. This time I knew I wasn't going

anywhere, and I felt a strong sense of euphoria hitting me. It's good to be coming back.

Before long, the two of us finally returned. I notice as we approached the house that Haruhi was sitting on the steps up front, obviously worried about what was going to happen to me. The moment she saw that we had returned and that I was safe, she immediately bolted towards the car. As I opened the door, she grabbed me by my arm with a look of concern. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," I said with a smile.

She then noticed the redness and swelling on her father's face and look at me in confusion. "What happened?"

"We talked things out," I said smugly.

As soon as I said that, I saw Naru-san exit the house and jog up to where we were. "Is everything alright?"

"It's fine," said Oruki as he got out of the car. "Kyon-kun and I chatted for a bit, and we decided that it was best if he were to stay a while longer… and… I guess it's okay with me if… if you two sorta… started going out."

Upon hearing that, Haruhi turned to me and smiled her trademark million-watt smile. She hugged me tightly, almost to the point of strangling me. After that, she ran around the car and hugged her father as well.

"Thank you, daddy!" she said, about as sweetly as I ever heard her say anything.

"You're welcome," he said softly, patting his daughter on the head.

Naru-san of course cheered as well and hugged her husband. "Thank you for being so sweet, dear."

After a few seconds of hugs, Oruki cleared his throat, obviously about to say something important. "However… seeing as how things have now become more serious between you two, there are going to have to be some changes around here. Don't think for a second that I'm going to just let you two do whatever you want with each other around here. It's bad enough that letting the guy you want to be with stay in my house. I'll be damned if I'm going to let him get his filthy hands all over you."

… You're not serious…

Haruhi was obviously thinking the same thing as she began to pout. "Hey, no fair!"

"Hey, if you don't like my rules, you can leave anytime you want. Rule number one! No kissing, touching, feeling or any of that other stuff in my house EVER!"

You can't be serious!

"Rule number two! You two are not allowed to be alone with each other without supervision at any point in which you in the house!"

"Oruki-kun," said Naru-san sweetly. "Isn't that a bit harsh?"

Her comment was left ignored. "Rule number three! From here on out, Kyon-kun here is to be chained up in the basement every night before we go to bed!"

Now I know you're not serious… right? Please tell me he's not serious! Someone? Anyone?!

"Don't worry," said Oruki as he began to head into the house. "I'm pretty sure I can think of some more rules. Just give me some time."

… Oh no… he really is serious… what was I thinking coming back here? Is it too late to live out in the streets instead?

Haruhi grabbed me by my arm and began to pull me into the house. "Don't worry, Kyon. We'll find a way! Besides, he only mentioned 'in the house.'" She then turned towards me and winked. It doesn't take long for me to realize what she meant. She then cheerfully raised her fist in the air as we entered the house. "Let's get the others together and have a celebration for Kyon's return!"

Her father turned towards us and raised an eyebrow. "Another one? All you guys ever seem to do is party. What ever happened to you guys…" It was then that he stopped himself, as if appearing to remember something. "Speaking of which, there was something that bothered me about a week ago. I was going to let it go, seeing as to what had happened afterwords. But now that everything is settled down, I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you two something."

I looked at Haruhi, hoping she might know what he was talking about. She appeared as stumped as I was.

"Just out of curiosity, when I called you two the night you guys went on your trip…"

Oh no… nonononononononononono…

"Were you two drinking?"

And there we have it! All that's left is the epilogue! I truly hope that guys enjoyed this chapter and story. It's been a blast to write, and you guys are the greatest fans ever. I promise that it won't take long before I have the epilogue up! Man, I can't believe it's almost over.

In any case, see you next chapter!

Epilogue

And so this story finally comes to a close. Words cannot describe all the mixed feelings I'm having now that I'm here. It's great that I was able to bring closure to this story, but I've had such a great time working on it that I know that I'll miss it dearly. It's been a hell of a ride for all of us, and I'm very happy that all of you are sitting with me. You guys are awesome fans and readers. I appreciate every thing you guys have said, both good and bad.

Anyway, it's time to get this show on the road. Here is the epilogue to Meet the Suzumiyas.

Epilogue

It's hot… really, really hot. There have been times where I secretly wished that I had chosen a different school to live at. A school that had proper air conditioning and wasn't falling apart. A school where I would meet normal people and hang out with them. A school where my life was relatively care free.

But I don't wish for those things anymore…

Why is that? Well, for starters, I had the luxury of having my beautiful girlfriend sitting behind me. Wow… calling her my girlfriend still felt weird. Even after three weeks, I found myself having to pinch my arm just to be sure this wasn't some crazy dream. But yes, it was indeed true. Haruhi and I are officially dating, and it's been pretty good so far. The only really bad point would be the beginning when Oruki delivered his punishment for "suspicion of alcohol consumption." This of course amounts to us being guilty until proven innocent, which was really unfair. He couldn't prove we were drinking (even thought we technically were). In any case, I will abstain from

telling you the nature of our punishment, as it was too brutal and horrifying for me to want to remember.

Anyway, the nightmare that was those five memorable weeks before we finally admitted our true feelings was over. Things have finally stabilized, and life with Haruhi and her family has started to feel normal… or about as normal as it could possibly be.

Yep, I'm glad I was able to stay. I'll take the good with the bad.

"So how are things going for you and you know who?"

Speaking of the bad…

"We're fine," I said, trying to eat my lunch.

"Oh I'm sure you're more than fine," teased Taniguchi with an extremely annoying wink. God he pisses me off. "Frankly I'm surprised that it took you this long to finally get with her. I mean, everyone else thought that you two should have hooked up a year ago."

I could care less what other people think of me and Haruhi.

"It's great that things are going well for you two," said Kunikida.

"And to think that Suzumiya's parents actually let you live with them," said Taniguchi with his mouth full. "They must be weirdos to allow that."

Say what you want about them, but they're genuinely decent people… most of the time. It doesn't really please me to hear you bad mouthing them.

"Anyway, all that matters is that you finally have your home situation figured out," said Kunikida.

With that we quietly finished our lunch…

For the most part, the last three weeks went by rather quickly, with only a few things worth noting (other than the obvious ones of Haruhi and I officially dating and that horrible punishment). For one, we soon found a video online of the Brigade confronting James Randi. Haruhi was thoroughly pissed when she saw that the video was titled ***Morons try to sabotage James Randi. Epic Failure!*** I was more than a little embarrassed to know that I was online for all the world to see, but luckily my face wasn't shown so there's a small glimmer of hope that this video won't come back to bite me in the ass.

On a more disturbing note, I soon found out what it was that Nagato wanted to talk to me about, and it was not good news. I found out about it when I came into the clubroom during lunch the first day I returned to school…

I found Nagato in the room, reading as usual. I called to her as cheerfully as I could. "Hey Nagato."

She lifted her head and nodded lightly to acknowledge my greeting. "Welcome back."

I took my usual seat, being sure to turn towards her. "Hope this place wasn't lonely without me." She didn't respond to my comment, which meant that there was an awkward silence between us for a minute before I remembered what the bookmark said. "Um… hey Nagato. Remember that bookmark you left in my book at the train station? I was thinking now was a good time for you to tell me whatever it was that you felt we needed to discuss."

After hearing that, Nagato closed her book and set it on her lap. She then stared at me with those cool eyes of hers before speaking. "The matter to which we must discuss concerns you. The fact is that while I was scanning your brain, I discovered something that was troubling."

I began to get nervous when I heard this. Anytime Nagato describes something as troubling, you know it's serious. "What did you find?"

"It appears that a microscopic piece of super-analog data has embedded itself within the confines for your brain."

Super-analog? Where have I heard that… oh no… "You mean… a piece of that… thing we fought in that grocery store… is in my head?"

"Correct," responded Nagato. "It is likely that the particle entered your nasal passage shortly after it was detonated."

Now I was really scared. "Am… am I in danger? Is this thing going to kill me?"

"It is unlikely that you are in any danger," she said reassuringly. "The creature is in a dormant state and cannot sustain itself on your tissues. Previous analysis indicates that it needs cell wall structures to feed on in order to survive and grow. Since human cells lack cell walls, you shouldn't be at any risk."

That was slightly relieving, but the idea of that thing living in my head was still unnerving. "Could you remove it?"

"The only possible way to do so would be to manipulate the data inside your head so that an opening of sufficient size can be made to remove it, and since there's a risk that putting the data back together could result in errors, it could mean that you may suffer brain damage. There is also the risk that removing the cells would give the cells the opportunity to find sustenance and grow. It is likely better to leave them there and monitor your health closely."

"So you can just make them disappear?"

"I cannot. I am not designed to manipulate super-analog data."

I slumped my shoulders upon realizing that these cells in my head were here to stay. I suddenly remembered the time when we put those data lifeforms into my cat. Now that something similar has

happened to me, I couldn't help but wonder if this was somehow karma related.

"So… you were going to let me leave knowing this thing was still in my head? What would have happened if it woke up or something?"

"Another interface was going to monitor you at the location you would have lived just in case something went wrong. While I would have preferred to monitor you myself, doing so would have meant leaving Suzumiya-san, which would have made her suspicious."

I sighed heavily. "So why didn't you tell me about this sooner?"

"I didn't want to worry you," was her surprising response. It's good that she had my feeling in mind, although I think this time it was probably better if I could have known about it before I almost left this place.

So now I know that something nasty is hiding in my head. Such joy. And knowing that it was created by Haruhi only makes this even more enjoyable. But in any case, it's probably best if I didn't think about it. Nagato said that I should be safe, so I'll go ahead and trust her judgment.

As of right now, I was currently and happily walking home with Haruhi. Of all the things that have happened in the last few weeks, spending time with her has definitely been the best part. Not that it's been easy finding time to spend with her. Oruki's insane house rules had more than put a damper on the romance. I was fortunate that I didn't actually have to be chained up in the basement, but the other rules still stuck. He even started getting down on me for holding her hand. I mean, really? Come on.

Luckily, Haruhi and I have been able to find ways around the restrictions we were on. The rules only stated that we couldn't do anything IN the house. Nothing was mentioned when we were outside and away from it. This meant that more than once Haruhi

ended Brigade meetings early in order to have a private conference with yours truly (one of which happened to involve a certain bunny costume, but enough about that). We were even daring enough to try making out on the roof, since technically it wasn't inside the house. Unfortunately, we were caught, and Oruki finally discovered Haruhi's secret hiding place. After arguing for almost an hour on how we technically didn't violate the rules, Oruki put his foot down, stating that ON the house still counts as IN the house (to which I wholeheartedly disagree). In the end, our punishment was the removal of the step we used to get on the roof, which had to be done by me. Fortunately, whenever Oruki had to leave the house for any reason, Naru-san was considerably more lenient on the rules of the house, saying that it was okay "as long as we didn't go too far."

So that just about raps up all of the events of the last few weeks. My life is feeling great overall, and I'm having trouble seeing how anything could go wrong right now. Am I being too optimistic? Perhaps. I'm not usually like this, but how often am I this happy? Oh, and if your wondering if you could trade places with me, sorry, but that offer expired. I know that I didn't specify an expiration date, but you know what? I don't care! Go screw yourself!

"Kyon!"

I was snapped back into reality by the sharp yell of the girl walking next to me. I jumped a bit when she did that. "What?"

"You're zoning out again," said Haruhi, who grabbed my shoulder and shook me a bit. "Cut it out."

"Sorry," I said while scratching the back of my head. "I've had a lot on my mind lately."

"Well just don't let that day-dreaming get in the way of your studies. I worked way too hard getting the both of us caught up for you to screw it up now."

Hey, I worked hard too, you know.

"Don't think that just because we're now together that you can become complacent. Just remember that I'm your Brigade Chief before I'm your girlfriend, and as such, my responsibility is to ensure the success of all my members. Failure will be met with a severe penalty!"

Penalty, huh? What kind?

Haruhi stared at me sharply. "Don't get any weird ideas! I'm being serious! You better get your homework done first thing!" She then blinked for a second, as if she had remembered something. "That's right. I almost forgot to tell you. I'm not coming home with you today."

I raised and eyebrow at her when I heard this. "Really? Where are you going?"

"You remember that boy I told you I occasionally help tutor? Well, he called me yesterday to ask if I could help him. Of course I agreed. I'd feel terrible if he didn't do well in school."

Oh right, the kid who would later discover the secret of time-travel. I wonder how he's doing? I merely nodded as the two of us walked a bit more, just enjoying the feeling of holding each others' hand. Just as we came close to home, she let go and moved in front of me.

"I just want to remind you that you need to make sure not to make any plans a week from now."

Plans? Me? You should know me better by now. What kind of plans do you have?

Haruhi looked at me with mild annoyance. "Come on. You don't know? Tell me what today is."

Today? Well, if I remember correctly, it's June 30th… oh no… That means…

Haruhi's expression turned to sheer excitement. "That right. Tanabata!"

I hung my head upon hearing those words. What was she up to? I wasn't going to have to go back in time again, was I?

"I can't believe a year has gone by already! We didn't do enough for Tanabata last year, so this year we're going to have to put in one hundred times the effort!"

One hundred times! Just what are you planning anyway? Please don't make us do anything that would give your father a reason to kill us!

"Don't worry," said Haruhi while waving her hand forward. "I'm sure he won't kill me."

Not helping… not helping at all… And what do you mean he won't kill you? What about me?!

Haruhi then grabbed me by my tie and pulled me close to her face; close enough for me to smell the sweetness in her breath. "I'll talk with you later today, okay?" And with that, we closed the distance between our lips and gave each other a soft, gentle kiss. Soon after that, she let go and ran off, waving me good bye. Dammit, those lips could probably get me to forgive anything…

I was home a minute later, and I soon placed my bag on the kitchen table, feeling mentally exhausted by the day. I was greeted by Naru-san, who seemed prepared for my arrival by making another one of her accursed energy drinks. "How was school today, Kyon-kun?"

"Exhausting," I said as I pulled my books out to prepare for my homework. As much as I'd love to put this off, I was sure that Haruhi would have a fit if she came back to find that I'd done none of it. I did my best to swallow down the drink as fast as I could, ignoring the taste that made my taste buds scream in agony. I figured that as long as this stuff didn't kill me, it must be good for me, right?

After I did that, I started my homework while Naru-san gave me company by reading a book. I was able to get the first few problems done on my math homework before I brain started screaming for some other kind of stimulation. I eventually gave in and turned to Naru-san to ask her something that had been on my mind for a while.

"Naru-san, if you don't mind me asking, there's been something I've been thinking about for a while."

Naru-san lifted her head from her book, looking a little surprised. "What is it?"

"I've been thinking, during that week before Haruhi and I went on our trip, you knew that your husband wasn't actually planning on kicking me out, didn't you?"

Naru-san smiled before putting her finger to her lips and winking. "Sorry, but I'm not supposed to reveal any secrets." The expression on her face was so incredibly cute that I couldn't help but gawk at her for a second.

A second was all I got before I felt something hit the back of my head. Ow! That hurt! What the hell?!

When I turned towards the source of the pain, I spotted Oruki standing above me, looking somewhat annoyed. "Quit staring at my wife!"

What the hell is wrong with you?! I wasn't staring!

"Sure you weren't," he said as he took a beer out of the fridge. "So when are you moving out, anyway?"

Very funny. I suppose the answer to that is not for a while.

"You think I'm joking," he said as he sat down to my left. "Just remember that I can still kick you out whenever I want." He then

shakes his head a bit. "I swear I must be out of my mind to let my daughter's boyfriend live here."

Yes, we get it. You've said that for the fifth time now. Well, if you hate me being here so badly, I could always move away and let you deal with Haruhi's world ending temper tantrums.

He didn't respond right away, instead getting up and sipping his beer. "Just be sure to get your chores done before the end of the day."

Of course, that the agreement, isn't it. Although I have to admit that the chores seemed even more brutal then ever before.

The couple hours went by without anything else to note, at least not until Haruhi came back from tutoring the time-travel kid.

"I'm home!" she screamed with way more excitement than she should be allowed to have.

"Where the hell were you?" asked Oruki while watching a baseball game on TV.

"Helping that one kid down the street with his homework. I don't know why he asks for my help. He more than smart enough to do it himself."

"Maybe he just likes the company," added Naru-san sweetly.

Yeah, I bet he does… and no, I'm not getting jealous of some kid.

"You finish your homework?" asked Haruhi, looking down at my work while putting her bag down.

"Getting there. Ready to do yours?"

"I'm all done," she said. "I did it while I was helping that kid."

Already? How the hell can she do it so fast? And while helping someone else, too. It's so not fair!

It was then that I heard Oruki getting up and yawning. "Now that the games over, it's probably a good idea that I get some exercise!"

I froze the moment he said that. Whenever he mentioned the word exercise, it only meant one thing… I was going with him. I turned towards him and smiled nervously. "Well… you go ahead and enjoy yourself…"

"Don't give me that crap!" he said as he grabbed me by my shirt collar and began to drag me towards the door. "Let's go!"

"Wait! Stop! What about my homework and chores?!"

"You can do them later."

Later?! How am I going to be able to do that?! I usually can barely stand after the torment you call exercise!

"Quit your belly-aching!"

I turned to Naru-san and Haruhi as the both of them moved further away. Can't you two help me?

"Make sure your homework is finished when you get back," said Haruhi heartlessly.

"I'll be sure to have dinner ready when you get back!" said Naru-san cheerfully.

Damn you both! I swear I'll get you both for this! What am I going to do?! Dear reader, remember that offer that I said was expired? Well maybe we can work something out. How about you take my place during all the bad stuff. How does that sound? If you're interested, you can find my number in the phone book!

Oh wait! It's a cellphone! They don't list those in the phone book!

And there we have it. The story is finally over. It's hard to imagine that we've come this far. It could be said that it's the end of an era. However, this story will always hold a special place in my heart, and I hope it does for you, too. I've said this before, and I'll say it again. I am absolutely blown away by this story's popularity. Never in my wildest dreams would I ever have imagined that this story would become what it has become. It's all because of the support of you guys that I was able to force myself to write close to 240,000 words of story in less than a year. Thank you!

Oh and a couple things. First, you may be wondering about the dangling plot thread with Yuki telling Kyon about the thing in his head. You might be thinking "Are you doing a sequel?", and my answer to that is… maybe. I have other projects I wish to start working on first before I consider it, but if it turns out that a sequel never comes, you can just safely assume that the super-analog thingy never does anything to Kyon.

The second thing I wanted to mention is a bit of good news. While the official story is now over, I decided that I wanted to add a bonus chapter so badly that I decided to announce it now. The next thing I post will be a bonus chapter about how Oruki and Naru first meet! I look forward to writing it, and I hope you guys look forward to reading it!

That's all I have to say! Leave a review if you wish, although by now I have more than enough of them. See ya!

Omake Part 1

Before I move on, I wish to inform all of you about the whole "Kyon live with Haruhi" bit. For those of you that don't know, that was a prank by me with several other writers that were on the inside. I truly hope that most of you laughed with us and didn't take it the wrong way. In any case, I've since removed the offending material, seeing that the admins for the site were likely to remove it eventually, and the joke was dead anyway. Thanks to all those who helped out.

As for this omake, this will be about how Oruki and Naru met and got together. The starting scene takes place between the 30th chapter and the epilogue. Bear in mind that the narrative perspective will change between Kyon's and third person during this omake. I'll try my best to make the transitions as easy to identify as possible.

For some reason, I imagined young Oruki to be a mix between Harima Kenji of School Rumble and Hanamichi Sakuragi of Slam Dunk. There are also four more OCs that play the role of Oruki's friends. You'll learn more about them later. I also went and gave Naru a maiden name, realizing that it was needed.

Without further delay, let get on to the final installment to this fanfic.

A Meet the Suzumiyas Omake: There's Something About Naru (Part 1)

It was your average, completely ordinary Saturday evening. It's funny that my idea of an ordinary evening was in fact the rarest kind of evening that I usually experienced these days. Fortunately, today was an exception. Absolutely nothing happened today that would be in anyway classified as extraordinary, and that to me was a good

thing. Sure, I do enjoy the occasional adventure once in a while, but the events of those horrible five weeks were among the most taxing in my life. I needed a chance to recharge my batteries, and when you're living with a family like the Suzumiyas, you tend to treasure every second of normalcy you can get.

Nevertheless, life was good right now. The four of us were now sitting in the living room after eating dinner and cleaning up, watching TV. There had been a romantic comedy on that apparently exited Naru-san enough that we were all talked into watching it together. The story was nothing out of the ordinary. It was about some guy coming home after finishing college only to run into the girl he was in love with in high school. Needless to say, hijinks and hilarity ensue while this guy attempts the impossibly stupid in order to win her love. It had a few moments that were genuinely funny, although I'd be lying if I said that I hadn't seen better. Naru-san, being as easy to please as she was, seemed to enjoy it immensely, while the rest of us seemed content enough to enjoy it somewhat.

Of course, as all romantic comedies do, the movie had a happy ending, and the guy won the girl. Naru-san appeared especially pleased with the ending, clapping away when the movie ending.

"I love happy endings," she said with her usual amount of sugary sweetness. "So romantic."

"It was alright," said Haruhi as she sat up and stretched a bit.

"Of course in the real world," spoke Oruki, "if a guy like that tried to do all those things to get a girl's attention, he'd probably get a restraining order."

Leave it to you to kill the mood, Oruki.

"Hey, I'm just saying. In real life, women don't like guys who are like that."

"But I like it when you're like that, Oruki-kun," purred Naru-san as she leaned onto her husband's shoulder.

"You don't count. You're not like most women."

Did he just say what I think he said? Yes… yes he did… wow…

As if immediately realizing how poorly he chose his words, Oruki immediately tried to backpedal. "Uh… which is to say that… it's a good thing that you're different. Norma… I mean… average women are boring."

Nice save…

My reaction was reciprocated with a nasty glare from the male Suzumiya. However, Naru seemed to have bought it and responded by hugging him.

"I know what you meant, Oruki-kun."

With those words, the small amount of tension that was in the air diminished. How the hell was Oruki so fortunate to have a wife that was so easy to get along with. Lucky bastard!

I heard the sharp sound of someone clearing their throat to my right, and I turn toward it to find that Haruhi was now glaring at me. What? I… I'm a lucky bastard, too.

"Whatever," she said with an obvious amount of discontent before getting off the couch. "I'm getting something to drink."

"Me, too," said Naru-san as she too got up. "Anyone else need anything?"

"I'll like some juice," I responded.

"I'm good," said Oruki as he slid back into his spot on the couch. He waited a few seconds until both girls had left the living room before he spoke in a low voice. "I'm going to get it."

"Huh," I responded in confusion. "What do you mean? She didn't seem angry."

He sighed heavily before responding. "You don't quite know her as well as I do. She's… very passive aggressive. She might seem okay right now, but next thing you know, she'll 'accidentally' drop my dinner on the floor, or she'll 'suddenly misplace' something important to me. Stuff like that. She doesn't like direct conflict, so she finds other ways to get back at me when she's mad."

I began to imagine Naru-san sitting quietly in the kitchen deviously planning on how to exact her revenge in her husband, all with an evil grin on her face. The idea of it was so ridiculous that I decided to remove the image from my mind immediately. There's no way she could be like that, right? For some reason, I realized that I probably would prefer an angry Haruhi over an angry Naru-san. At least when Haruhi's mad at you, the whole universe knows it. It's much easier to deal with issues like that when they're out in the open. The idea of not knowing when my girlfriend would exact revenge on me was rather scary. Wait, is there something wrong with me for thinking that? Probably…

It was then that I remembered something about Naru-san and Oruki. "Hey, didn't you guys tell me that you two met in high school?"

Oruki blinked in surprise when he heard the question. "Did we tell you that? That's funny." He then yawned deeply and put his hands behind his head before continuing. "It's true. It's hard to believe that so much time has gone by."

Against my better judgment, I decided to ask another question. "How did you two get together?"

Oruki sighed upon hearing me. "I'd rather not get into it. It's a long story…"

However, I noticed Naru-san pop her head from the kitchen. "Oh! You want to know how we got together? Wonderful!"

Oruki immediately put his hand to his face. "Oh no. Not again…"

Naru soon bounded from the kitchen with the drinks meant for me and her. "Come on, Oruki-kun. Please tell it! You tell it so much better than I do!"

"I'm not in the mood," said Oruki as he looked up at the ceiling.

Naru-san grabbed her husband by his shoulder and began to shake him back and forth. "Do it. Do it do it do it do it do it do it do it do it!"

"No!" yelled Oruki in annoyance.

However, when he did that, Naru-san's expression went from excitement to sadness, and she began to pout. I could see her eyes start to water a little, and her lips began to quiver. She genuinely looked like she was about to cry.

I could see that Oruki was beginning to crack from the pressure, and before long, he finally gave in. "Alright fine! I'll tell the damn story!"

Almost immediately, Naru-san's face brightened as she gave her husband a hug. It was then that I realized that Naru-san was actually putting on an act the whole time. I understood now that while Oruki was usually the one with the power in their relationship, Naru-san knew how to push his buttons in order to occasionally get what she wanted.

I then heard a voice behind me. "Aw man, don't tell me that you're going to tell that stupid story again." It was obvious that Haruhi had heard this story more times than she would have liked to.

"Well, your mother and boyfriend want to hear it," said Oruki, "so just sit back and listen." He then rubbed his eyes a bit as if trying to think back to when it all happened.

After about a minute, he took a deep breath and began speaking. "It all started during my second year of high school…"

Twenty years ago…

A young man with a well-toned body laid back on a old, ruined couch in the middle of a messy apartment. His clothes were shoddy and torn, and his hair was styled in a pompadour that stuck out a few inches too far from his head.

"I can't believe I ever thought that looked good on me," said Oruki with obvious embarrassment.

"I thought it looked cute on you," giggled Naru-san.

"Right…" responded Oruki before continuing his story.

In the room with him were four others. There was a lanky kid with blond, spiky hair named Murazaki; a short pudgy boy with dark, messy hair named Toshi; a large, well muscled young male with extremely short, brown hair named Hideki; and lastly a youngster with a well-toned body that had a sandy colored pompadour named Shino. All five minors were lounging around in the run down apartment, some looking relaxed, others looking bored.

"Your friends, I take it?" I asked.

"Yeah, I met them during my freshman year of high school, with the exception of Shino. I'd known him from middle school."

It was then that Murazaki spoke up. "Oruki-kun. You do realize that you missed your first week of school, right?"

Oruki didn't respond to the question, preferring to put on a sour face first. "Idiot! I know that. Who cares? School is for losers."

"The irony…" said Haruhi a bit sourly.

"Hey, I was a stupid kid back then, alright?" said Oruki with a shrug. "More then anything, I was just pissed that I was forced to go to a new school. I figured that I'd spite my mother by not going."

"I'm just saying," said Murazaki. "I mean, you barely managed to make it through your freshman year, and now your well on your way to flunking out of school altogether."

"Pfft. My mom thinks that putting me in a new school would help turn me around. I didn't want to change schools."

"Why? Is it because you miss us?" asked Shino with a smug grin. His grin didn't last long before an empty soda bottle clocked him in the head. Shino responded by getting extremely annoyed. "What was that for a#$%^! Are you saying you want a rematch?!"

A second later, Oruki was on his feet, and the two teenage boys had their foreheads against one another, staring each other down.

"I'll take you down anytime I want!" yelled Oruki with a devilish grin.

Shino returned the grin with one of his own. "You got lucky the last time, Oruki-kun! This time, I'll be the one to overthrow your evil reign!"

"Stop fighting, you two." yelled Murazaki halfheartedly. "We barely have any furniture as it is. The last thing we need is to have my dad kicking my ass just because you two have to continue your stupid rivalry."

"Murazaki is right," said Toshi while holding onto his stomach. "Instead of fighting, we should be getting something to eat."

"You're always hungry," said Shino with annoyance. "And too bad for you that I'm broke."

"You're never broke," said Toshi suspiciously. "You're parents are loaded."

"Yeah well they cut off my allowance until my grades start shaping up. Besides, why should I always pay?"

"Because you're the only one who ever has any money," said Oruki with a chuckle.

"Well I guess that means we're screwed now," said Shino while crossing his arms.

It was then that the well-muscled Hideki finally spoke while moving towards the door. "I'll pay…"

The other four appeared shocked, partly because the young man actually said something.

"Wait a minute," said Shino. "Since when did you get some money?"

Hideki didn't respond as he walked out the door.

Oruki chuckled some more at his good fortune. "Leave it to Hideki-kun to come through for us once again."

It was then that the remaining four left the apartment.

"Interesting group of friends," I said.

"I guess," responded Oruki as he continued to reflect. "They were all different from one another. Shino was a bit like me, which was probably why I was friends with him for so long. He liked to think that he was my rival, but he was more bark than bite when it came to fighting. Murazaki was the one kid in our group with a decent head on his shoulders. If it weren't for him, I suspect that I would've been in jail by then. Toshi was a strange one. He loved to eat, but what made him special was his fearlessness. He was more like a badger.

He wasn't the strongest, toughest or quickest, but he was ridiculously ferocious in a fight. You'd never know it unless you'd seen him in one, though. And Hideki? He barely ever said a word, but he was fiercely loyal. He was probably the only one of the group that I actually didn't want to ever get into a fight with."

"Whatever happened to them?" I asked. "You still talk to them?"

Oruki was silent for a few seconds. "I'll get to that later. Anyway, after we all ate, I decided to leave and head home…"

Oruki was now walking the streets while patting his stomach. There are few things in life more satisfying than a good bowl of ramen with beef. As he rounded into an alleyway so he could get home quicker, he suddenly heard something in the distance. It sounded like a girl yelling along with some evil laughter from a guy.

Nearby, a young girl with brown hair that went just below the shoulders was struggling to hold onto her purse. A large, bald, fat man was pulling on it with one arm, an evil grin on his face. He was clearly toying with the young girl.

"Let go!" yelled the young girl.

"I'm afraid I can't do that, missy," said the evil man with a nasty chuckle. "Although I may change my mind if you give me something else in exchange. Tell you what, you either give me your body or your purse. Take your pick."

"No!" yelled the girl as she continued to pull with all her might.

"Stubborn, aren't you? Fine, I'll just take bot…"

The man was unable to finish his sentence before a foot collided with the back of his head. He immediately let go of the purse as he tumbled forward into a nearby wall. It was then that the owner of the foot was revealed.

"I didn't think you were such a coward to pick on young girls, Kazishima-chan," said an extremely confident Oruki.

The large man grunted a bit before lifting himself off the ground and rubbing his head. "You attack me from behind and think you have the right to call me a coward?!"

Oruki crossed his arms in unwavering arrogance. "Fool! Like it would matter which direction I attacked you from!"

The fatso got to his feet and cracked his knuckles. "I'll teach to sneak attack me and call me '-chan!' I refused to believe that you live up to a name like 'Lightning Demon Oruki Suzumiya!'"

"As you may have figured, him and I fought, and I obviously won."

"Let me guess. That girl you rescued was Naru-san?" I asked.

Naru-san giggled a bit. "Yup. That's me."

Oruki began to look a bit uncomfortable. "Don't get me wrong, I wasn't trying to be a hero or anything. I was just looking for an excuse to fight that fatass."

"And were you really called the 'Lightning Demon?'" I asked, feeling a bit suspicious.

"He's making that part up," said Haruhi.

"I am not!" spoke Oruki loudly. "I had quite a reputation when I was young. I didn't take crap from anybody. Anyway, I soon won that fight against the big lard mouth without even so much as taking a hit…"

"I remember you getting hit a few times," interrupted Naru-san.

Oruki grunted upon hearing that. "Uh… okay, so I did get hit a few times, but they were grazing blows, and didn't hurt…"

A few minutes later, the fight was over. Kazishima was now on the ground face first, completely knocked out. Oruki began to wipe some of the blood from his lip, completely satisfied with his victory, although he began to feel his stomach feeling weird. It usually a bad idea to exert oneself after eating a large meal.

He was about to walk away when suddenly the girl he rescued shoved her purse right in his face.

"Did Oruki-kun want to take my purse, too?"

It was at this point that I lost it and began to laugh hysterically. I was blown away that the first thing she ever said to him was THAT. I mean, really? Really? What a way to start a relationship.

"It get's worse…" said Oruki as he continued.

Oruki stood there dumb-founded at her question. It took him several seconds to come up with a response. "Idiot! Why would I want your stupid purse?!"

"Oh, so he must want to have my body instead," said the young Naru, looking confused.

Naru-san covered her face in embarrassment. "I was so confused. I had never been rescued from a mugging before, so I didn't know how to thank him."

I laughed a good minute before finally recovering enough to breathe. Seriously, only Naru-san would think that was an appropriate response to being rescued.

After I was done laughing, Oruki cleared his throat. "Anyway, as I was saying…"

"Idiot girl!" responded Oruki loudly. "Get the hell out of here before I change my mind and take whatever I want from you!"

The young Naru smiled brightly, bowed politely and ran off. "Thank you vary much, Oruki-kun!"

Annoyed, Oruki yelled one last thing before she was out of sight. "Moron! Stop using my name with that honorific! You don't even know me!"

"And that's how we met," said Oruki with a bit of embarrassment.

"I'm assuming there's more," I said. "You didn't even get to the part where you two get together." I think a part of me wanted to know more because I knew it was embarrassing for Oruki.

Oruki rubbed his eyes with his thumb and index finger. "I really don't want to."

"Aw, come on, Oruki-kun," pleaded his wife. "You aren't even close to the best part!"

With an exasperated sigh, Oruki forced himself to continue. "Fine, you win… anyway, I completely forgot about the incident until about two days later…"

It was now a Sunday, and Oruki and his buddies were once again relaxing at their hangout, doing absolutely nothing productive. Oruki was flipping through the channels on the TV, hoping to find something interesting while the others watched on in a complete blasé.

It wasn't long before Shino spoke up. "This is stupid. Why don't we go downtown and show the Alley Monkeys who's boss?"

"We do that every week," said Murazaki. "It's almost cruel to pick on them now."

Shino had another idea. "Let's loiter down at the park and pick up some chicks!"

"Girl's are stupid," responded Oruki with complete disinterest.

"You only say that because you've never had a girl," said Shino smugly. "I on the other hand have had three."

"Yeah right," said Toshi while rolling his eyes and eating some Pocky. "And I'm only big boned."

"Well, if you guys don't do something soon, I'm leaving to find my own adventures!"

"Go ahead," responded Oruki, not even bothering to look at him.

Just as Shino was about to leave, a knock was heard at the door. Curious as to who it could be, Shino made his way to the door. When he opened it, he was surprised to see a beautiful young girl on the other side.

"Hello!" greeted Naru politely. "Is there someone here by the name of 'Lightning Demon Oruki Suzumiya?'"

Shino was baffled for a second before he regained his composure. "N… no. He's not here. Perhaps you've heard of me, though. I'm known as 'Shino of the Searing Fist.'"

"Nope," responded Naru simply.

Trying not to get flustered over the fact that she hadn't heard of him, Shino leaned against the edge of the door to try and look cool. "Well you've heard of me now, sweetie. Trust me when I say that I'm way cooler than that other guy…"

It was then that a hand grabbed Shino by his shirt and yanked him back with great force, nearly causing him to fall on his ass. "Get out of the way, you moron!" yelled Oruki as he approached Naru. "What the hell do you want? And how the hell did you find me here?"

"Oh, there's Oruki-kun!" said the girl cheerfully. "I merely asked everyone in town where 'Lightning Demon Oruki Suzumiya' was. I would have been here yesterday, but it took a while to find someone who knew. I eventually found someone who said that they knew of some delinquents that lived here, so here I am!"

"So here I am, thinking 'Great! Now the whole town knows about my stupid nickname and that some strange girl is trying to track me down.' I mean, did you really have to ask everyone?!"

"Well, it worked, didn't it?" asked Naru-san innocently.

Oruki took yet another deep breath before he continued…

After Oruki had enough time to process what the strange girl just said, he narrowed his eyes in annoyance. "Well you found me, okay? Do what you came here to do and beat it!"

Naru then held up a bag. "I decided that the best way to thank Oruki-kun was to make him a lunch. I had to remake it since the one I made for him yesterday got old, but this one is nice and fresh!"

Oruki grabbed the bag from her and eyed it suspiciously. "Is that it? You interrogated the whole town just to give me a lunch?"

It was then that Shino decided to be a smart ass. "Oh, I get it. No wonder you didn't want to go looking for girls in the park. You already had a girlfriend!" Shino's remark earned him a welt on his head a second later.

Oruki turned back towards the girl sourly. "Well, now that you're done, go scram. I didn't ask for a damn meal. And stop calling me 'Oruki-kun!' You don't know me!"

"Hey, Oruki?" asked Toshi. "If you're not going to eat that obento, can I have it?" Toshi was instead fed a foot to the face.

"Okay, Oruki-kun!" said Naru as she waved happily and began skip away down the hall.

Before he completely lost his temper, Oruki slammed the door and marched back to the couch with the bag in hand. "Idiot girl!"

"Have to admit that she was cute, though," said Shino while rubbing his head. "You're just lucky that I don't get violent in front of cute girls or I would have laid you flat."

"I don't care if she's cute," said Oruki as he began to open the bag. "She's annoying. It's as if she's missing a screw or two in her head."

"Well, you know what they say about…" Shino didn't finish his sentence before he noticed something about Murazaki.

Soon the rest of the group noticed something wrong with him. He was deathly pale.

"Dude," said Toshi, "what's wrong with you?"

It took a second for him to respond. "I… it's her… It can't be…"

"Who? That girl just now?" asked Shino. "What about her?"

"Don't you know who she is?" asked Murazaki in a light panic. When no one nodded, he yelled loudly. "That's Naru Shikamoto! You can't tell me you guys haven't heard of her!"

"I have…" said Hideki quietly.

When the others merely shrugged their shoulders, Murazaki took a deep breath before relating the horrible truth…

"Stop it, Dad!" yelled Haruhi with obvious annoyance. "You're clearly exaggerating."

"Maybe a little," said Oruki while shrugging, "but he was clearly unnerved when he saw her. Apparently, he was the only one of us who knew her from junior high. He started telling us about all the crazy stuff that she did back then."

This is starting to sound really, really familiar…

"Shikamoto-san is infamous among anyone who went to our school during junior high," said Murazaki. "The girl is obsessed with three things: ghosts, spirits and demons."

"No wonder she likes you so much 'Lightning Demon,'" said Shino with snark.

"Shut up!" said Oruki harshly.

"Seriously, it was the only thing she focused on back then," continued Murazaki. "One time she hung up bats all over the school in the hope that it would attract ghosts. Another time she started stacking desks and chairs on the roof of the school to try and reach the heavens. And then she started drawing summoning circles on everything you could imagine, saying that she was looking for the perfect location to summon 'The King of all Demons.' I'm telling you that she's out of her mind. Don't even think about going out with her."

"Moron! Like I'd want to be anywhere near her!" yelled Oruki with a frown.

"Good! I rather not have to talk about the guys who asked her out. Let's just say that none of them lasted more than a week before they

dumped her. No girl, no matter much cute she is, is worth that much trouble."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," said Oruki as he opened the obento to see what was inside. It contained some rice balls, sushi and an egg sandwich.

"I'd be careful," said Murazaki nervously. "I wouldn't trust that food."

"Whatever," said Oruki nonchalantly as he bit into a rice ball. To his surprise, it was absolutely delicious. "Mmm!"

Noticing his friends enjoyment, Toshi began to pout. "Come on, man. Can't you share some?"

"Go away," said Oruki rudely. "If you want some free food, go save your own damsel in distress."

"Looks like she's trying to win you over by appealing to your stomach," said Shino with a smirk.

"Yeah right. I seriously doubt I'll ever see her again."

"More irony…" said Haruhi.

"Did you chase after her for more food?" I asked.

"No!" asked Oruki. "I didn't go after her at all. She went after me!"

Naru-san giggled. "I'm afraid I acted a bit impulsively that day."

"It happened when I left the hangout that evening…"

Oruki was walking back home, secretly hoping that his mother wasn't home yet. She always let him have it whenever she found out that he'd been out with his buddies. It was fine by him if she was, though. He wasn't afraid of her. At least, that's what he told himself every time he walked home.

But tonight, he wasn't going to go home right away. On his way back, he spotted a girl standing in the middle of the street. It was dark by now, so he wasn't able to make her out right away. He was going to just walk around her, but just as he got to her, a hand suddenly grabbed his wrist. Before he knew it, he was being pulled towards some random direction.

It was only then that Oruki realized who it was. "You again! What the hell do you think you're doing, idiot girl!"

"No time! Oruki-kun needs to follow me!"

"In case you haven't figured it out by now, Naru-chan had a really bad habit back then of referring to everyone in the third person, including people she was directly talking to."

Naru-san rubbed the back of her head in embarrassment. "I was a bit socially awkward back then."

Oh, like anything has changed…

"So against my better instincts, I decided to follow her. Why? To this day, I still have no idea. I think it might have been morbid curiosity, or maybe I was happy to find any excuse I could to not have to go home. I mean, she was only one girl. How dangerous could she be? I'd taken on guys four times her size, so I wasn't really scared or anything. In any case, we eventually came to where she wanted to take me…"

The two of them finally arrived at their destination: a old, condemned apartment building. Oruki stared suspiciously at the building as Naru pulled him towards it. After a second, Oruki pulled his hand away.

"Hold on! What that hell do you think you're doing?!"

Naru turned around, a bright smile on her face. "We're going inside to find ghosts!"

"The hell I am!" yelled Oruki. "Why the hell do you need me to do that?!"

Naru blinked a bit before answering. "Oruki-kun is the 'Lightning Demon,' right? He can protect me if the ghosts attack."

"I'm not helping you with anything!" yelled Oruki. "And for the last time, stop calling me 'Oruki-kun!'"

Ignoring the last statement, Naru scratched her head. "Is Oruki-kun afraid of ghosts?"

"No!" yelled Oruki in pure frustration. "Why the hell would I be?"

"Good!" cheered Naru as she grabbed Oruki's arm again and pulled him into the condemned building, ignoring all the warning signs stating that it was dangerous to enter.

As they made their way inside, Naru pulled out a flashlight from her purse and began to look around. Oruki reluctantly followed, cautiously looking around for anything that might be dangerous. In truth, he was far more afraid of the building collapsing on top of them than meeting anything supernatural. He didn't believe in any of that stuff.

After a about a minute or two of seeing and hearing nothing but the obvious signs that the place was falling apart, Oruki decided to speak up. "So… when are we leaving?"

"I never leave a place until I've checked every single room. When searching for ghosts, one must be diligent. Ghosts are good at hiding."

"Idiot…" said Oruki under his breath. "Have you ever actually seen one?"

Naru shook her head. "Nope."

"Then how the hell would you know anything about them?!"

Before she could answer, the floor under Naru's feet gave way, and she fell through. Luckily for her, Oruki reacted quickly enough to catch her just before it was to late. Unfortunately, Naru dropped the flashlight, causing the room to fall into complete darkness. Ignoring the fact that he could no longer see, Oruki pulled the young girl to safety.

"See why we shouldn't be in here?!" yelled Oruki irately.

Despite not being able to see her, it was obvious from her voice that Naru wasn't the least bit flustered. "Oh my, it sure is dangerous here."

"'No kidding' is what I should have said," spoke Oruki while looking at his wife. He then looked at me while pointing at her. "She nearly fell through a hole and got seriously hurt, and she doesn't show even the slightest sign of fear. It's amazing!"

You aren't jealous, are you?

"No!" said Oruki before sighing a bit. "Okay, maybe a little. I just wonder how she does it."

"I just don't get scared," said Naru-san with a proud smile. "I've always been that way. It's only when someone else is in danger that I feel and fear."

"Anyway," continued Oruki after giving his wife a squeeze with his arm, "since we could no longer see where we were going, it became obvious that we had to get out. Too bad that leaving a condemned building at night without any light is ridiculously hard…"

The two of them continued to try and feel their way around in the dark, using the cracked sheet rock as the only source for guiding them in the right direction. After about a minute of them wandering in the blackness, Naru spoke up.

"I heard Oruki-kun didn't go to school during his first week."

Oruki was rather surprised and annoyed that the girl would know this. "How the hell did you find that out?"

"Oruki-kun goes to the same school as me. I hear rumors about him from other girls in my class."

"Is that so…"

"I wish Oruki-kun would come to school. It would be a shame if he got expelled."

"I don't really care if that happens."

"Why?" asked Naru with confusion in her voice.

"School is for losers. I got better things to do."

Naru was silent for about a minute before responding. "It would make me happy to see Oruki-kun there."

"Why is that?" asked Oruki apathetically.

"Because Oruki-kun is a good person."

That statement threw the young man off. He'd been called a lot of things over the course of his life, but never once had anyone ever told him that he was a good person. The statement embarrassed him, and he was glad that the room was too talk for her to see him. "You got me all wrong."

It was at that moment that the two of them found some stairs and made their way down. Unfortunately, the stairs broke a bit, causing

the two of them to tumble down the rest of the steps. Before long, Oruki was lying on his back with Naru on top of him. He struggled not to enjoy the feeling of her weight on top of him, but he was easily failing.

After Naru realized what had happened, she laid her head onto Oruki's chest. "This is nice and comfy. Maybe I'll go to sleep."

"I… idiot girl…" said Oruki as he become more and more uncomfortable. "G… get off of me!" He then started pushing her off of himself.

When Naru realized what he was doing, she quickly got off of him. Surprisingly, She wasn't upset by his behavior. In fact, she was actually feeling quite the opposite. "See? I knew it!"

Oruki sat up, feeling confused. "Knew what?"

"Oruki-kun is different from the others. The others in the past would only follow me because they thought I was pretty, but Oruki-kun didn't follow me because of that."

"I didn't follow you at all. You dragged me here!"

"Oruki-kun is strong. He could have pulled away if he wanted to. But he didn't because he wanted to come with me."

"Could you do me a favor? Can you please stop talking about me like that?"

Naru blinked in confusion. "Like what?"

"Stop saying 'Oruki-kun' and 'he' when you're talking to me. It's weird. Try using words like 'you' or something. It's not that hard."

Naru was silent for a minute, feeling a bit shy. "No one has ever said anything about how I talk before. I always thought it was okay."

"You thought wrong," said Oruki as he got to his feet. "Let's get the hell out of here."

After about another minute, the two of them finally found their way out. Feeling much more relieved to be out of there, Oruki took a deep breath.

Naru then turned towards Oruki and flashed him a million-watt smile. "Thanks for helping me with my search, Oruk… uh… I mean 'you-kun.'"

Oruki was so distracted by the brilliance of her smile that he didn't even notice the obvious error in her statement.

A second later, Naru began running off, waving Oruki good-bye. "I hope I get to see 'you-kun' at school tomorrow!"

This time, Oruki caught the mistake. "You idiot! That's not how you say it!"

"Come on, mom," said Haruhi. "Really?"

"I was doing it to tease Oruki-kun," said Naru-san, "but I don't think he got it."

"Yeah, right," said Oruki has he stared at her suspiciously. "In any case, the next day I ended up going to school. And no, it wasn't because of Naru-chan. My mother had forced me to go this time." He ignored his wife's giggling and continued the story…

Oruki was now sitting at his desk for the first time since the school year had started. He was wearing a black gakuran and a sour expression. His teacher was quick to hand him all the assignments that he'd missed, telling him that if he didn't turn them all in by the end of the week that he'd fail the classes. He was also annoyed to hear people talking about him in class, saying stupid stuff like "Oh

my God, he showed up!" or "Is that that Suzumiya kid who gets into fights all the time?" Very annoying.

Of course, none of these things prepared him for his biggest surprise. It became obvious to him when a pair of hands slammed down onto his desk. He looked up to find out who'd have the nerve to do such a thing only to discover a horrible reality.

Naru was one of his classmates…

"Good morning, 'you-kun!'"

There's more to come, but I felt that this was a good place to stop. I knew that the Omake would be long, so I was prepared to spit it up.

Anyway, I hope this Omake was enjoyable. Have an awesome day!

Omake Part 2

It's been nearly a year, but it's finally finished. There were times when I thought I'd never finish it, but thanks to a little motivation care of the DVD release of Haruhi Season 2, my creative inspiration was back! I apologize profusely for taking so long, but at one point, I'd temporarily lost interest in the series and needed to recharge my batteries. Anyway, I'm sure you guys have been eager for the conclusion of my omake.

Well, here it is. Enjoy!

A Meet the Suzumiyas Omake: There's Something About Naru (Part 2)

I placed a hand on my face the moment I heard those words leaving Oruki's mouth. I refused to believe that such a coincidence was possible. What were the odds that Haruhi's parents would get together under circumstances so amazingly similar to the circumstances the lead me to meet with Haruhi? Is this some kind of cruel joke? Perhaps the Suzumiyas are cursed to fall into some kind of weird pattern where they're obligated to fall for their high school sweetheart. After all that I've learned in the last year, I could believe just about anything.

Naru-san giggled lightly. "He looks so cute in a gakuran. You should wear one again sometime!"

"Like hell I will!" said Oruki.

"So is that the end of it?" I said. "Did you get together after that?"

"That ain't the end!" said Oruki. "There's a lot more. It's… just a bit embarrassing to talk about."

"Is thinking about me in a schoolgirl outfit making you uncomfortable?" asked Naru-san as she wrapped her arms around her husband.

"That has nothing to do with it!"

"Will you hurry up with the story, already?" said Haruhi.

Oruki narrowed his eyes at his daughter. "Watch your mouth! You should know better than to be rude with me!"

After Haruhi turned her head away, Oruki took a deep breath and continued the story.

After staring dumbfounded at the girl in front of her for several seconds, Oruki became annoyed. "Idiot girl! What the hell are you doing here? Get out of my class!"

Naru blinked in surprise. "But… this is my class, too."

Oruki placed his face in his hands upon hearing this. "You never told me we were in the same class!"

Naru rubbed the back of her head in embarrassment. "I didn't know."

"How could you not know? Don't they call attendance every morning?"

"I never paid attention to that, so I had no idea that 'you-kun's' name was being called every time."

"Stop calling me 'you-kun!'"

Naru became extremely confused. "But 'you-kun' told me told to call him that."

"I did not! I told you to stop calling me Oruki-kun! And when I said to use 'you' I didn't mean it that way!"

"What does he want to be called?"

Oruki sighed deeply as he fought his increasing exasperation. "Try Oruki-san…"

Naru frowned. "Oruki-san is boring…"

Oruki looked away from Naru, uncomfortable with her frown. After giving a small sigh, he relents. "Fine, call me Oruki-kun. Just don't say it in public."

"Yay! Oruki-kun and I are friends now!" She then wraps her arms around his head.

"Let go of my head, you idiot!" said Oruki as he fought to get her off of him. He then noticed several people around him smiling and giggling that him and Naru, all of them getting the wrong idea. It didn't help that half of his face was buried in her ample chest. He got out of her grip and pointed towards the only empty desk. "Go sit down and leave me alone!"

After Naru complied, Oruki spent the remainder of the time before class giving the people looking at him an evil stare. It didn't take long for people to stop staring back.

"This is sounding like some lame, romance manga," said Haruhi.

"Well, they say that truth is stranger than fiction," said Naru-san. "That why I believe that the stranger a story is, the most likely it is to be true!"

That doesn't even begin to make sense. So if I told you a story where I was abducted by sock people from Mars, would you believe it?

Naru-san's eyes lit up. "Did that really happen? I bet it did! With all the adventures you've been on, it wouldn't surprise me!"

Dammit, Naru-san! Quiet! Your daughter is sitting right next to me! What part of "don't talk about my exploits in saving the world" don't you understand?

Oruki was quick to save the day. "What kind of crap have you been telling my wife? You should know by now how easily influenced she is!"

Haruhi berated me as well. "Didn't I tell you already to stop messing with my mom? It's not funny! Cut it out!"

I sighed deeply, half relieved that Haruhi didn't suspect anything and half annoyed that I was yelled at again. I looked at Naru-san, who appeared apologetic. I swear sometimes that you're going to be the death of the universe.

Oruki cleared his throat in order to get our attention again…

It was lunch time. Oruki had planned to buy his lunch at the cafeteria, but before he could go, a hand grabbed him by his collar and pulled him out the classroom door. He scowled when he realized that it was Naru.

"Let go of me!"

"Oruki-kun can eat lunch with me."

"I don't have a lunch yet, let go!"

"Oruki-kun can share mine. I have extra food to share!"

Oruki sighed deeply and gave up. He allowed himself to be dragged upstairs and onto the roof of the school. He remembered how tasty her food was the last time he ate it. Surely it was better than anything the cafeteria offered, and it was free! Free food was always nice.

Naru opened up her obento and portioned out her food with Oruki. Neither of them said anything for a few minutes while they ate. Oruki then noticed that Naru appeared to want to say something to him. "What's on your mind?"

Naru paused a bit before swallowing her food. "I bet that Oruki-kun is very far behind on his schoolwork. Will he be alright?"

"Don't worry about me," said Oruki as he placed a piece of shrimp in his mouth. "I'll get it done."

"I… could help," said Naru a bit nervously.

Oruki couldn't help but find her expression extremely cute. He turned away to hide his face. "Why would I want your help?"

"I want Oruki-kun to pass so he won't get expelled."

Oruki picked up the bento box to finish the rice. "I don't want to be some charity case."

It was then that an idea came to Naru. She crawled up to him, moving her face a bit too close to his. "Then Oruki-kun can help me in return! I have a lot of other places I want to explore, but they're too dangerous to go there alone. If Oruki-kun comes with me, though, I should be okay!"

"Forget it! No deal!" yelled Oruki after swallowing the last of the rice.

Naru's expression sank after he said that. "Okay…"

Her look of disappointment got to Oruki. As much as he didn't want to admit it, she was starting to rub off on him. "Tell you what. If you help me with my homework and feed me lunch everyday, you've got yourself a deal."

Naru looked at him and beamed. "Deal!" Her million-watt smile did not go unnoticed.

A few minutes later, they finished their lunch and went back downstairs. Along the way, Oruki began to wonder if perhaps he had made a mistake.

"And for the next month, Naru-chan and I would go to whatever strange place she would find to see if she could find ghosts and stuff, and as she promised, I was given some help catching up on my schoolwork and received free lunches. What was great was the fact that my mother gave me lunch money every school day, never even knowing that I didn't need it. That money sure came in handy."

I looked at Naru-san, feeling a bit baffled at the idea that she was the one helping him with his homework. How could someone so dense sometimes be any good at schoolwork?

"Hey, I resent that!" said Oruki. "It maybe true that she has her head in the clouds half the time, but she's actually rather book smart. She probably could have went to nearly any college she wanted…" His voice trailed off after that, as if some small amount of regret had hit him. "Never mind. After that month, things seemed to be going well for us. However, something happened that would change everything.

Oruki was sitting in his seat at school, looking towards the windows in disinterest. It was then that a hand slammed down onto his desk with great force. At first he thought it was Naru giving some kind of annoying greeting again, but instead he discovered that it was his long time friend, Shino.

"Wow, who'd have thought I'd see you so soon?" asked Shino.

Oruki scowled at him. "What the hell are you doing here? This ain't your school!"

"That's where you're wrong," said Shino as he wagged his finger. "You see, my parents made me transfer schools thinking that it was

our other buddies that were dragging my grades down. What they didn't know was that you were at this school."

Oruki sighed when hearing this. He had mixed feeling about having his friend at this school. He did like the fact that he had someone other than Naru to keep him company. However, he was also a bit embarrassed about his reputation. Since he started coming here, everyone had been convinced that he and Naru were dating, and he didn't want his friend to get the wrong idea.

It wasn't long before Shino spotted another familiar face. "Hey, I recognize her." He turned towards Oruki and elbowed him lightly. "I see why you haven't been hanging out with us much lately. Your sweetheart is here too, huh?"

"We're not going out with each other," said Oruki gruffly.

"Sure you're not."

"We're not! She's been a pain in my ass since I started coming here!"

Shino narrowed his eyes and studied his friend for a few seconds. He then grinned. "So she's still single?"

"What do you mean by that?" asked Oruki.

Shino didn't answer, instead walking over to Naru's desk. He placed his hands onto her desk and gave her his best smile. "Hey there! Remember me?"

"Nope," said Naru without a moment of hesitation.

Shino was taken aback by this, but he recovered quickly. "We met before about a month ago, when you were trying to give that lunch to Oruki."

Naru placed a finger on her chin to try and remember him. Her eyes suddenly widened. "Oh! You must be Shikoku of the Silly Fist!"

An loud chuckle came from Oruki upon hearing that. Shino ignored his own embarrassment. "That's Shino of the Searing Fist."

"Oh I apologize then, Shino-chan," said Naru.

"-chan!" exclaimed Shino. "I'm not a child!"

"Shino-chan has such a youthful spirit that I thought it would be appropriate."

By this point, Oruki had completely cracked up. It always amused him greatly when his best friend made a fool of himself.

After giving his friend a sharp look, Shino gritted his teeth and banged his fist onto her desk. "Enough introductions! I have a question. Are you available this weekend?"

"Nope," said Naru. "I have plans."

Shino felt a great deal of disappointment. "Oh… doing what?"

"I'm visiting a graveyard with Oruki-kun this weekend."

Shino looked back at Oruki in confusion, but before Shino could reach the wrong conclusion, Naru spoke some more. "He's there to protect me from any ghosts and evil spirits that might attack me! In return, I feed him lunch and help with his schoolwork!"

Shino nodded, slightly relieved that it wasn't an actual date. He then had a great idea that caused him to grin widely. "Say, you know what? It would probably be even safer for you to have another guy around to protect you. Maybe I can help, too."

"That's a really good idea!" said Naru as she hit her fist on the palm of her hand.

"In exchange, you can be my tutor as well. I was forced to transfer because my grades sucked. Maybe you can help turn that around for me."

"Deal!" said Naru, smiling sweetly. "Since you're friends with Oruki-kun, I know I can trust you."

"Great! I'll see you guys then!" said Shino, feeling somewhat smug.

Oruki was no longer laughing.

"So for the next month or so, Shino would tag along on our trips all over the city looking for supernatural weirdness."

That couldn't have possibly been awkward.

"Yeah, yeah I know," said Oruki. "In hindsight, I probably should have said something, but I was in a bit of denial at the time and was afraid that if I said something, I would look bad." He took a deep breath before he continued. "Anyway, things between the three of us seemed alright for a while, but then one day changed all of that…

One day, Oruki and Naru were walking together towards a local cafe that they and Shino would often go to work on schoolwork. Shino wasn't with then because he had cleaning duty. Oruki was silent during the walk there, patiently listening to Naru talking about whatever silliness she had on her mind. However, he was feeling a bit nervous at that moment.

"Hey, Naru-san… there's something I've been wanting to ask you."

"Yes?" chirped Naru.

Oruki looked away, pausing briefly. "What do you think of… Shino?"

"Shino-chan is a good person, and he's very funny."

Oruki smirked mildly at that statement, knowing most of the time he was funny was unintentional. That smirk would be short lived, however.

"I like him."

Oruki stopped in his tracks upon hearing that. He could feel his heart sinking. He didn't want to admit it, but those words were devastating to hear. Clenching his fists and teeth, he marched forward at a brisk pace. "I'm going home."

Naru responded with some surprise. "Why's that, Oruki-kun? Don't you want to work on your homework?"

"I'll do it at home!" said Oruki before he darted away, wanting to put as much distance as possible between them.

Naru stood there, completely confused by Oruki's behavior.

Oruki was sitting at his kitchen table, his head in one of his textbooks. He had intended to do his homework in order to forget about what Naru had said earlier, but he failed. He tried to convince himself that it wasn't a big deal if she liked his best friend, but it was no use. Thinking about it made him feel wretched. Why did he feel this way? Could it be that he liked her? He'd told himself before that wasn't the case, but part of him knew he was lying. This train of thought ended when he heard the phone ring. He answered it, wondering who it might be.

"We've got her."

Oruki felt an enormous alarm when he heard this. "Who the hell is this?"

"If you want to get her back, come to the Alley Monkey's hideout… and come alone."

The person on the other line hung up. Feeling a large amount of panic and rage, Oruki spent no time hesitating. He bolted out the door towards the location where the voice said she was.

"How could you not tell that it was an obvious trap?" asked Haruhi sourly.

I was about to ask that myself. The only way it would have been more obvious is if the person on the other line had said "Hey, we've set up a trap. Want to come down here so we can spring it on you?"

"Have I not already said more than once that I was a stupid kid. That, and I wasn't thinking too clearly after what had happened earlier."

Oruki had arrived at an abandoned warehouse. As is traditional with all traps of this nature, it was dark inside. Oruki slowly walked in, wondering where everyone was. The door behind him was slammed shut, and the lights in the building turned on, revealing that he was surrounded by a dozen other high school aged kids. Oruki looked around the building for a sign of Naru.

"Where is she?"

It was then that all of the others laughed heartily. A familiar looking large and fat young man answered. "I can't believe it was this easy to draw you out."

"Answer me, Kazishima!"

"I have no idea," said Kazishima. "Truth is, we never bothered to kidnap anyone. Would have drawn too much attention. No, what we wanted was to get you here alone."

Oruki's blatant stupidity became obvious to himself. He was tricked and was about to be attacked from all sides. How could he be so stupid?

"Get him!" screamed Kazishima while pointing directly as his enemy.

Oruki tried his best to fight back, but he was hopelessly outnumbered. It wasn't long before he received a severe beating and lost consciousness.

When he woke up, he was in the hospital. Despite the medication he was hooked up to, the extent of injuries were still painful. When he became aware enough to realize what had happened, he cursed himself for his lack of judgment. The Oruki of a few months ago would not have gotten himself into that kind of situation, at least not without some back up. He wondered if being around Naru was making himself weaker. He was then reminded of what she said earlier about Shino, and he felt even more miserable. He believed that this was all her fault. She had made him pathetic. Having her around was the worst thing that had ever happened to him. She had to go. There was no way around it.

Shorty after his mother came back to check on him, both Naru and Shino showed up. Seeing the two of them together made his heart ache even more. He didn't even bother to acknowledge their arrival.

"Oruki-kun!" said Naru with both relief and distress. "What happened to you?"

"I heard you were found near the Alley Monkey's hideout," said Shino. "What would make you want to go there alone? I mean, that's crazy! You're tough, but you're not that tough!"

Shino's words only angered Oruki further. He looked towards Naru with fiery eyes. "I don't want to be your friend anymore."

Naru was taken aback by his statement. "Wh… why?"

"I don't have to explain myself! We're done! I don't need your help anymore! Leave me alone!"

Naru felt a mixture of pain and confusion. She couldn't imagine why Oruki would say such a thing.

Shino quickly stood up to Oruki. "What the hell are you saying? What has she done to you?"

"Shut up! I wasn't talking to you! I want her gone because she's ruined my life!"

Even Shino was shocked to hear this. Before he could say something back, Naru ran out of the room with tears rolling down her eyes. Seeing her so upset made Shino incredibly pissed. He grabbed Oruki by the collar and raised his fist.

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't pummel you into a coma!"

Oruki didn't answer him right away. Instead he looked away from his friend, the fire in his eyes dissipating. "You like her right?"

The question caught Shino off guard. "What?"

"I already know that you like her. You've been around her all this time, so it's kinda obvious. Why don't you two just be happy together and leave me alone."

Shino now had some understanding as to why Oruki was acting this way. He sighed deeply and slowly let go of his friend's collar. "So that's what this is all about."

He turned and walked towards the door. Before he left, he narrowed his eyes at Oruki. "I suppose I should thank you. You've always been a real *pal* ." The last word of that statement dripped with venom. Shino immediately left the room.

Despite doing what he'd told himself needed to be done, Oruki couldn't help but feel horribly remorseful. He thought back to the last two months, reliving every moment he'd been with Naru and all of the crazy times they had together. His memory had saved moments where her eyes would glow as they traveled through some mysterious location. Then, when they were finished searching some place, he recalled how incredible her smile looked as she waved

goodbye for the night. It was at this moment that he realized that he'd fallen in love with her, but now she'd probably never talk to him again.

That last realization was too much for him. He quickly pulled his bed sheets over his face and wept as silently as he could.

"You have a real problem with thinking things through," I said.

"Not one of my proudest moments," Oruki said.

"How could you forgive him for that, mom?" said Haruhi.

"It wasn't easy, to be honest. I'm just easy going that way, though."

Oruki continued. "The first day that I returned to school obviously wasn't going to be a good day."

A week had past since the event at the hospital. Oruki was back in class, although he was still pretty injured. He desperately didn't want to be back in school, it was not because of his body. He deplored being in the same classroom and Naru and Shino. He almost couldn't bring himself to look at them, and whenever his did, he noticed that neither of them looked at him. He debated whether or not he would make up with them. He had no idea if they would forgive him. He decided it was best to wait until lunch to do so.

After several agonizing hours, the time had come. Oruki watched as the two of them got up and made their way out the door. He followed them, being sure not to be noticed. When they made it to the stairs, Oruki waited a minute just to make sure that they didn't notice him. He wasn't sure what he was going to say, and he had hoped that the extra time would be helpful. It wasn't. Eventually, he gave up and went up to the roof.

As soon as he opened the door, he was spotted by both of them. Shino stood up and stared him down while Naru turned away from him.

"What do you want?" asked Shino harshly.

Oruki didn't respond right away. He had planned to apologize to the both of them, but his pride got in the way. He had hoped that if he pretended that nothing had happened, everything would be okay. "I… I was thinking that since I wasn't in school a while that I'd fallen behind my quite a bit so I could use some help."

"I was wrong," said Naru almost too quietly.

"Huh?" responded Oruki.

Naru stood up while still facing away from him. "I was wrong. You are a mean person." Before Oruki could respond, she turned around with tears welling up in her eyes. "I hate you, Oruki-kun!" She then ran past him and through the door. She was followed closely by Shino, who gave a nasty glare at his former friend before leaving.

Oruki was stunned for a moment. He looked down at his hands only to realize that they were clenched in a super tight fist. A single drop of water landed on one of them. It took a moment for him to figure out that it was his tears. His despair soon turned into extreme rage as he beat his already injured fist into the floor. He hit it over and over again until his knuckles started to bleed. Once he got to the point where he couldn't punch it again, he collapsed onto his back and wailed away in sorrow. He didn't move from that spot for the rest of the school day. It didn't matter that he was missing his classes. All he wanted to do was disappear so that he couldn't feel this way anymore.

Oruki didn't bother to show up for class the next day. Instead, he spent it at his old hideout with the remainder of his buddies. He had hoped that being around other guys would snap him out of his

melancholy, but it wasn't working. It was bad enough that the others tried to get him out of it.

"What's with you, Oruki?" asked Toshi. "You're acting worse than when you found out you were transferring schools."

"I heard that him and Shino got into a fight or something," said Murasaki. "Something about a girl, right?"

"I don't want to talk about," said Oruki.

"Wait a minute," said Toshi. "Are you talking about that one girl that came over here a few months back?"

"No way," answered Murazaki. "It can't be her… right? Please tell me you're not fighting over Shikamoto-san." When Oruki didn't respond, Murazaki place a hand on his face. "You've got to be kidding me. It figures that only you two would be crazy enough to go after her."

That last statement irked Oruki immensely. He got up and lunged at Murazaki and pinned him against the wall. "Take that back!"

Toshi and Hideki immediately responded by trying to restrain Oruki. It took some doing, but the two of them were able to pull him off and pin him to the ground.

"You need to go cool off somewhere else," said Hideki.

After he was let go, Oruki got up and left, his temper still boiling.

"I am I missing something here?" I asked. "If things had gotten this bad, how did you two make up?"

"I'm getting to that!" said Oruki. "I'll admit that things looked pretty bleak at this point. In fact, if Naru-chan hadn't gone missing, it's possible that we might not have made up."

"You went missing?" I asked Naru-san. "Where were you?"

"I'll get to that," answered Oruki. "Anyway, I avoided class for two more days before I finally came back."

Oruki finally returned to school after his extended absence. When questioned about why he left school early the other day and didn't return until now, he told the teachers that his injuries were getting the better of him and that he needed more time to recover. They seemed to buy into it. He was hopelessly behind on his schoolwork now, but that was the furthest thing from his mind. Instead, he was thinking about a certain empty desk, the one Naru usually sat at. He also noticed that Shino was looking a bit worried. Did something happen to Naru? An answer was definitely needed.

Oruki waited until lunch to approach Shino. When Shino noticed him, he looked down at his book bag, pretending to grab something. "What is it?"

"I've noticed that you're looking worried."

"Don't worry. It's none of your business."

Oruki swallowed his pride a bit. "Look, I know I've been an a#$%&* lately."

"Yes, you have."

Oruki grunted briefly before continuing. "I just want to say that… I take back what I said."

"Man, you really suck at apologizing," said Shino, finally looking directly at him. "Not that I'm really the one you should apologize to."

"Speaking of which, where is Naru-chan?"

Shino became distressed again. "I really don't know. That's why I've been worried. She wasn't here yesterday, either."

"What?" yelled Oruki.

"I didn't think anything of it yesterday. I figured that she might have been sick or something, but now that she not here again, I'm wondering if it's something worse."

"I still remember her number," said Oruki while leaning on the desk. "We'll call her when school is out."

The two young men spent the rest of the school day feeling concerned. They had hoped that perhaps she just had the flu and need more than one day to recover. Neither of them wanted to imagine that she was in danger.

When classes ended, the two of them made it to the nearest payphone. Shino stopped Oruki before he could make the call. "Hold on. Let me do the talking."

"Why should I do that?"

"Simple. Naru isn't upset with me, so if she happened to answer the phone, she'll probably tell me what is going on."

After deeply sighing, Oruki dialed the number and handed the phone to his friend. After a few seconds of silence, someone answered on the other line.

"Hello," said Shino. "Is Naru-chan there? She hasn't been at school lately, and we were worried." After a second, Shino's eyes widened in surprise. "Really? Do you know where she could be?" It wasn't long before his surprised turned into alarm. "You've got to be kidding me!"

The words coming out of Shino's mouth did little to encourage Oruki. There was no doubt in his mind now that something was terribly wrong.

Shino finally said goodbye and hung up. His face was mildly paler than before. "She's been missing for the last two days. Her parents have no idea where she went."

"Are the police looking for her?"

"They are, but they have no idea where to look. She didn't leave a message stating where she could be."

Oruki gritted his teeth and began to march off. "I'm going to look for her! If she's been missing this long, she could be in danger!"

"Are you serious? How do you expect to find her if the police can't?"

"I have a few places that I want to look. If you want to leave it to the police, go on ahead."

Shino grunted and paused reluctantly before taking off to catch up to Oruki. "Wait up!"

"This is starting to get really interesting," I said. A love triangle combined with a damsel with distress? Almost sounds like the plot of some movie. Heck, even Haruhi was showing interest now. Perhaps this was her favorite part of the story.

Oruki smiled a bit, perhaps enjoying the compliment. "As I was saying, Shino and I had spent the next few hours looking all over the city for Naru-chan. We looked at abandoned buildings, graveyards, alleyways, even the sewers. Unfortunately, we were making no progress…"

Oruki and Shino were sitting down at a street corner, looking exhausted. There wasn't a single sign that Naru was at any of the locations they searched, at least not recently. They'd hoped that she might be at these places looking for unusual stuff, but they had given up on that idea. Oruki was thinking hard on where else she might be.

There were a number of places that they could still check, but he was thinking that it was pointless to go to any of them. He was suspecting foul play.

"I have an idea," said Oruki.

"Really," responded Shino depressingly. "I pray it's a good one. I'm starting to think it's hopeless."

"The Alley Monkeys already knew that you and I spent a lot of time around her. I'm wondering if they did something to her."

"That's crazy. Why would they want to do something to her?"

"I don't know, but I bet they might at least know something." Oruki stood up and began to walk. "I'm going over there."

Shino got up and grabbed him by the shoulder. "You want to get creamed again? If you going to go over there, use your head!"

"What do you suggest we do?"

Shino smirked confidently. "Leave it to me."

It was about an hour later that the both of them arrived at the Alley Monkeys hideout. They were spotted immediately by the same dozen guys that attacked Oruki earlier.

"Well, looky here," said Kazishima. "If it isn't the 'Lighting Demon' and the 'Wimpy Fist'. Did you two come here for an extra helping of pain?"

"Where is Naru-chan?" yelled Oruki. "We know you did something to her!"

"Like we'd tell you anything," laughed Kazishima. "Get'em!"

As the group descended on Oruki and Shino, the door flew open to reveal three more individuals. It was the remainder of their friends,

Toshi, Murazaki, and Hideki. They all appeared eager to fight.

"It's been way too long since we last did this," said Murazaki.

"You guys are in trouble now," said Toshi. "I just ate dinner, and now I'm full of pent up energy!"

Hideki said nothing, grinning evilly instead.

Shino looked at the Alley Monkeys smugly. "I figured we could use a little back-up."

Kazishima became noticeably worried at the sight of all five of them. "It… it doesn't matter that all five of you are here! We can still kick your ass!"

Oruki cracked his knuckles in anticipation. "Think of this as payback for what you did to me earlier."

The five of them charged the Alley Monkeys in an all-out assault. The Monkeys did have the advantage in numbers, but it wasn't enough. When the five of them were together, they were nearly unbeatable. Within minutes, their enemies were defeated. Those who weren't beaten down had fled in terror.

Oruki grabbed the defeated Kazishima by his collar. "Where is she?"

"I don't know," said the fat man fearfully.

"Liar!" said Oruki as he raised his fist. "I know that you know something! Tell me where Naru-chan is!"

Kazishima shook his head desperately, tear down his eyes. "I swear it! I swear it! I really don't know! Please don't hurt me!"

Shino grabbed Oruki's arm before his could strike. "I don't think he knows, man!"

"Let go! I know he's lying!"

It was then that Murazaki interrupted. "Hold on a second. Are you saying that Shikamoto-san is missing?"

"Yeah," said Shino. "She's been gone for two days. We'd hoped that these guys would know something."

Murazaki started thinking. "I see. Have you guys looked around for her?"

"We've already been all over the city," said Oruki, still holding onto the collar.

"Have you looked in the mountains west of here?"

The question caught Shino and Oruki off guard. "No!" they both answered.

Murazaki scratched the side of his head. "I remember hearing a rumor that whenever a guy dumped her, she would go off into the mountains. Not really sure why, but my guess would be that she went there because she was upset with what happened with you two and wanted to get away."

"If she's been there that long," said Shino, "she might be hurt."

"We're going!" said Oruki as he let go of his enemy.

"How do you expect to find her out there?" asked Shino.

"I don't know," he said before stopping. He then turned towards the others, realizing that there was one more thing he needed to do before he left. "Thanks a lot, guys." He then looked away from them. "About the other day… I didn't mean to freak out on you guys like that."

"Don't worry about it," said Toshi with a grin. "You wouldn't be a 'Demon' if you were a nice guy."

Oruki smiled weakly before walking out the door. "See ya!"

"Wait for me!" said Shino as he bolted after him.

"So how were you expecting to find Naru-san in the mountains?" I asked. It would be like finding a needle in a haystack.

Oruki smirked as if he was expecting the question. "Luckily, we knew of a hiking trail that was often used by people in the area. We figured that since Naru-chan wasn't very athletic, she would probably stick to the trail or be nearby. That's where we started our search."

"Shouldn't it have been dark by then?" asked Haruhi.

Oruki scratched his chin. "Now that I think about it, I do remember it starting to get dark. I think it might have been June by then, so the days were pretty long." He appeared to have a flash of insight. "That's right! I remember stopping briefly at Shino's house to grab some flashlights before we went, just in case. We were maybe on the trail for fifteen minutes before he and I had this conversation with Shino…"

It was now dusk, and with the trees in the area, it was difficult to see anything too far away. The two boys had pulled out their flashlights and searched around for anything suspicious. The both of them knew that this was their last hope. If this failed, then finding Naru would be impossible.

After about five more minutes of searching, Shino decided to speak up. "Listen, about that question you asked me when we were at the hospital."

"What about it?"

"You asked me if I liked Naru-chan. Well, to be honest, I don't like her." He stopped and looked directly at his friend. "I love her."

Oruki stopped as well and looked back at his friend. He wasn't sure how do respond. A part of him knew that this was the case. Shino had always held his heart on his sleeve. However, hearing him say it was like having a wrench hit his chest.

"You love her too, don't you?" asked Shino.

Oruki couldn't answer the question. "What difference does it make? She already told me that she likes you."

Shino became confused when he heard this. "That can't be right."

"Why not?" asked Oruki.

Shino look away slightly. "Because… she already told me how she felt about me."

It was Oruki's turn to be confused. "What are you talking about?"

"Two weeks ago, I… I confessed to her." His face darkened with sadness. "She told me that she only liked me as a friend. Apparently, she already had feelings for someone else. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out who she was talking about."

Oruki's eyes widened upon hearing this revelation. It was now clear to him that he had misunderstood what Naru had said on that day. He was kicking himself for being so stupid.

"I was kinda happy at first when you decided not to be around her anymore. I had hoped that with you out of the way that I would have a chance to slip into her heart, but it wasn't long before I realized that there was no room in there for me." Shino looked at his friend with mild anger. "She was devastated when you said all those terrible things to her. She barely talked to me at all in that time. I wanted to console her, but nothing I said helped."

Shino's words increased Oruki's remorse tenfold. It was all his fault. All of this grief in the last week and a half was over some mistake.

No, it was more than that. His pride was also to blame. He blamed her for his own mistakes and lashed out at her when she did nothing to deserve it. It's no wonder why she told him she hated him.

Shino closed his eyes tightly and gritted his teeth, clearing fighting back tears. "It's not fair! You don't deserve her! Half the time that you two were together, you acted like you hated her! It doesn't make any sense! Why would she pick a jerk like you over me?" By now, his tears spilled over and down his face. "I've always been second to you, Oruki, no matter how hard I tried."

Oruki could not respond. If he had been a weaker man, he would have collapsed and burst into tears as well. He felt bad for his friend, but also knew that there was nothing he could do to make this right for him.

Shino pointed a finger at Oruki. "You're planning on apologizing to her, right?" After receiving a nod from Oruki, he grabbed him by the collar. "Then you better promise me this! If we ever find her, you will treat her like an angel, You hear me? If you ***ever*** hurt her again, I will personally beat the piss out of you!"

Oruki nodded. It was a lot to take in, and most of it was really bad. However, there was one glimmer of hope. He knew now that Naru had feelings for him. What he had to do now was obvious. Before he could even think about being anything more than her friend, he had to make things right. However, he and Shino would have to find her first.

Oruki and Shino reluctantly ended the conversation and continued their search. Unfortunately, it had become dark at this point, and the only thing they had to guide them were their flashlights. After crying earlier, Shino's eyesight had suffered a bit, and he was unable to see the cliff next to the path. He lost his foot and began to fall. Luckily, Oruki was able to grab a hold of him before he fell. To his dismay, however, Shino dropped his flashlight. It tumbled down and hit the ground hard enough to break it.

"Dammit!" said Shino while looking down.

Oruki shined his flashlight down the cliff to check the condition the other one. However, he suddenly spotted something else. "Hey, what that down there?"

"I don't know. We should find a way down and find out."

The two of them were able to find a safe path down the cliff and toward the mystery object. When they finally reached it, they discovered that it was a backpack.

"Holy crap! This is hers!" said Shino. "This is the backpack she always brings with her whenever we went out on our searches!"

"I don't see anything else. Maybe she not too far from here!"

The two of them searched around the area, and to their relief, they managed to find Naru. The bad news was that she was on the ground and not moving. They rushed to her aid immediately. Fortunately, she was still alive, but she was clearly in bad condition. Oruki began to shake her in a desperate hope to awaken her.

"Naru-chan! Wake up! Wake up! It's okay! We're here to save you!"

Naru slowly open her eyes and looked at the two men, who were barely visible in the dark. "O… Oruki-kun? Shino-chan?"

"Yes, it's me. Are you okay?"

She winced in pain before answering. "I fell down the cliff on accident. I think I hurt my leg."

It's okay, Naru-chan!" said Shino. "We'll get you to a hospital right away!"

The two boys picked her up and made their way out of the mountain. When they made it to a pay phone, they immediately called for an

ambulance. Before long, Naru was taken to the hospital for immediate treatment. It seemed for now that the nightmare was over.

"I had suffered a broken leg when I fell from the cliff as well as some dehydration for being out in the woods for so long," said Naru-san. "I was lucky that I wasn't in worse condition. The drop must have been at least four meters. It was so scary being alone like that for two days straight. I was starting to think I was going to die."

Uh, Naru-san? The next time you talk about nearly dying, could you not do it with a smile? It's kinda disturbing.

"When the police found out that it was us that rescued her," said Oruki, "they were suspicious. After all, the two of us did have a reputation for trouble-making. Luckily, Naru-chan was able to vouch for us. It's kind of a weird feeling being a hero."

"So I'm assuming you eventually apologized," I said.

"He better have," said Haruhi before pointing at me. "If you even said anything like that to me, the consequences would be earth-shattering!"

You have no idea, Haruhi. Noooooooo idea at all…

Oruki sighed deeply before finishing his story.

It was two days after Naru had been brought to the hospital. She was feeling much better than before, although she had a cast around her right leg. After that terrible ordeal, she was happy to be in a nice warm bed.

Oruki appeared at the door. After quickly scanning her to see how she was doing, he slowly and nervously approached. Naru saw him coming closer but didn't say anything. She was a bit nervous as well, as she was not sure if things were okay between him and her.

"Hey," said Oruki softly.

"Hi," responded Naru apprehensively.

Oruki spoke again after a brief pause. "I… need to talk to you."

"About what?"

Oruki scratched the back of his head. He had gone over what he was going to say a hundred times in his head, but it wasn't enough to prepare him for the real thing. "Look… I'm not very good at saying these things, but… about what happened when you visited me when I was recovering here. I… I was confused about a lot of things. Not only that, but when I got beat up, it hurt my pride really bad, and I took it out on you. You did nothing to deserve that, and I was lying about you ruining my life. If anything, you've done a lot to make it better. W… what I'm trying to say is…" He took a deep breath before saying his line. It took every last bit of will power to tear past the barrier of his pride.

"… I'm sorry."

Oruki felt incredibly vulnerable at this moment. It was a feeling that he loathed greatly, but he hoped that Naru would be the one person who wouldn't take advantage of it. "I understand if you aren't willing to forgive me. After all, I said some pretty mean…" He was interrupted by Naru's giggles. "What's so funny?"

Naru hid half of her face under the blanket. "Oruki-kun is cute when he's apologizing." She then slowly removed the blanket to reveal her smile. "I might be able to forgive him, but only under one condition."

"What's that?"

"Oruki-kun has to start bringing me lunch for the next month."

Oruki smiled back, feeling relieved that things were okay between the two of them. He had no idea how to cook, but he figured he could

think of something. See her smile again made him feel wonderful. He leaned towards her and, without thinking, kissed her gently on the lips. Naru's blush became many shade redder after the kiss ended. Oruki was shocked at what he did and wondered if it was a bad idea.

Naru eased his worries. "Kisses like that count as one day off your punishment."

Oruki chuckled lightly before leaning for another kiss. Unfortunately, Naru pushed him back.

"No more until you serve your punishment. I can't let you take away all of those days."

Oruki sighed and settled on holding her hand. The two of them stayed together like this for the rest of the day.

"So were you two dating then?" I asked.

"Sort of," said Oruki. "The truth is that I didn't feel right about asking her out officially until I was sure that she'd really forgiven me. It' just wouldn't have been right. After that, though, the rest is history."

"I worked him doubly hard on our searches as well," said Naru-san cutely. "I loved how eager he was to help me with everything. It was like he was a different person."

Funny. He seems like the same jerk now as he was in the story. Is he only like that when only you are around?

Naru-san hugged her husband tightly. "Well, he is tsundere."

"I am not!" said Oruki with some embarrassment."

"Yes you are! Tsundere, tsundere, tsundere!"

Hate to admit it, but she's right. It's another wonderful trait you passed down to your daughter.

It was then that I remembered my question about his friends. "So what happened to your high school buddies?"

Oruki became sullen when asked that question. "None of them are around any more. Shino moved to the United States after high school and married some chick there. He later inherited much of his parents fortune, so he's living comfortably. He calls me every once in a while, though. Toshi and Hideki both ended up in prison. Hideki had been robbing convenience stores at around that time, which is how he had that money that one day he bought us dinner. He never said a word about it to us. Perhaps he didn't want us to be involved. As for Toshi, he got into a bar fight a couple years later and was charged with aggravated assault. I haven't heard from either of them since they were sentenced. Lastly, Murazaki… passed away when he was 24. He had leukemia, and there was nothing the doctors could do to save him. The last few months of his life were terrible…" He trailed off after that.

The reality of hearing about what happened to his friend made me think of what might happen to the people I consider friends today. How many of them will I still know years from now? Will all of us drift apart? Will only a small handful keep in touch? It was impossible to know, and I didn't like how it made me feel to think about it.

"It's getting late," said Oruki. "You two should go to bed."

Haruhi and I nodded, said goodnight and got up to go to our rooms. When we were both upstairs, Haruhi stopped and turned towards me. "I should apologize for that. My parents can be so embarrassing sometimes."

"It's okay. I actually liked the story."

"I guess it's alright, although I'm sure my dad exaggerated some parts of it. I just hope we don't bore our kids with…" She stopped herself when she realized what she said. Are we thinking a little too far ahead?

"S… shut up!" she said with a gorgeous blush. "And stop giving me that goofy grin! I know what you're thinking about."

Apparently I'm not the only one thinking about that.

She huffed at me and walked towards her room. However, just as she opened the door, she stopped and looked at me. As if realizing that she forgot something, she darted back to me and grabbed me by the collar. After brushing each others' nose for a bit, we kissed sweetly for a few seconds. With a smile on her face, Haruhi let me go and walked into her room. God, I wish we could have our own place.

With a heavy sigh, I walked into my room and went to bed. Life was good, and I was sure the best was yet to come…

I can't believe it's finally over. Over 240,000 words and 1,300 reviews. I can't believe how awesome this ride has been. You guys have been great throughout all of it! Thank you!

And I have some good news for you. Remember when I mentioned possibly doing a sequel? Well, I'm making it official. Yes, there will be a sequel to *Meet the Suzumiyas* ! The title of that story will be called *Life with the Suzumiyas: the Darker Half* . I have a ton of great ideas for it, and I'm planning on making it better than the first one. I hope you all look forward to it!

I want to give a shout out to Hejin57, Superstarultra, Nukerjsr, BKE, GladiatorBeastMCK, Rick Controversy, Grahf, Nagatoismylover, and everyone else who helped support my fic with ideas and criticism. I also want to give a shout out to the nearly dozen people who used Oruki and Naru in their fics. I love you guys!

Anyway, this is the end of this fanfic. I hope you guys enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it. Bye!